



# **Selected Poems**

8th edition

**Andreas Gripp**

# **Selected Poems**

8<sup>th</sup> Edition

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# **Selected Poems**

8<sup>th</sup> Edition

**2000-2024**

Andreas Gripp

Beliveau Books

LONDON

*Selected Poems 8<sup>th</sup> Edition*

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## Foreword

I turned 60 in 2024, and decided to create this updated 8<sup>th</sup> edition of *Selected Poems*, containing 289 offerings, including a number of brand-new ones written up to the publication date; and together with my other recent works (listed just after the first title page of this book), I feel as though these all coalesce to present my poetic vision in an artistic endeavour that has gone on for over 30 years. I'm never certain what may follow the completion of a project, but if this is it, then thank you for being a part of it all.

Andreas Gripp  
London, Ontario, Canada  
November, 2024



*For my mother, Maria*



*Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty  
of the world, and makes familiar objects be  
as if they were not familiar.*

—Percy Bysshe Shelley

## And Then There Was Light

With your hands wrist-deep  
in fertile soil,  
you tell me your  
infant daughter died  
at break of dawn,  
on a day that our star  
rose without hindering cloud;

and you mused that early morning,  
as you sadly went and found her,  
stiff as a *Hasbro* doll,  
her unblinking eyes  
locked upon the ceiling,  
that to call it “sun” is a misnomer,  
for it’s connected to *Mother* Earth,  
and either “u” or “o”, it says the same  
masculine thing.

It’s the *female*  
that reproduces,  
you said, gives seeds  
a place to call home.

“Daughter,” you decreed,  
*call it Daughter.*  
It will surely love us more  
and our weeping will be greater  
on the days it isn’t there.

## Metronome

You never had a clock  
within your home,  
just a single metronome,  
keeping tempo  
more important  
than the time,

its clicks a call to dance,  
without the chains  
of *start* and *stop*,  
that never  
issue edicts  
to awaken,  
no pre-set ring  
to jolt  
from peaceful dreams,

no big and little hands  
that point to numbers  
which command,  
saying *when* it's time to eat  
and when to leave,  
*when* to walk the dog  
or check for mail,

just a steady, rhythmic beat  
of unfettered sound,  
the passing of the hours  
all unnamed.

**The excuse I use  
to avoid cleaning under the stairs**

How lonely it must be  
to be a spider in the basement,  
one that's sitting on its web,  
in a corner without light,  
awaiting that *rare* arrival,  
the hoped-for, off chance encounter,  
when an insect-thing  
will venture where it knows  
it really shouldn't,  
get trapped in sticky white,  
kick its hair-like limbs  
in a panic,  
sensing deep-down in resistance  
that the end has inevitably come,  
there's no escaping this alive,  
feeling the webbing  
beginning to bounce  
as its maker at last approaches.

I sometimes have to wonder  
if the spider ever pities,  
considers *mercy* for a moment,  
seeing its tiring victim struggle  
in the seconds before the kill;  
being tempted,  
not by pangs of some *compassion*,

but by those of *isolation*,  
supplanting that of hunger  
and its drive to feed and hunt;

taking an instant to say *hello*,  
in its sly, spidery way,

enjoy the twinning breath  
of *company*,  
a meeting of insect/arachnid eyes,  
wish it could *share* a tale or two,  
get to know this flying creature,  
fellow cellar-dweller, *better*,

hope there's no karma-bearing grudge  
or vengeance *doled* by divinity,  
that its prey will understand,  
know the slaying isn't personal,  
that the pinch and bite are quick,  
that the blood that's drained  
is a *gift*,  
gratefully received,

that *calming* sleep comes first,  
so deep in life's last ebbing  
there'll be the precious chance  
to dream.

## **The girl I would have married**

The girl I would have married  
had we met  
is on the other side of the street,  
a walking blur  
I only notice for a second.

And her hair is a shade of blonde  
or maybe brown I can't recall,  
nor anything about the jacket  
she'd been wearing nor the boots,  
only that for some silly unknown reason  
we would have married had we met,

maybe at the bookshop  
where I would have bumped her arm,  
said sorry for my clumsiness,  
which caused her to drop her classics  
and a dictionary too;

or it may have been at a party,  
hosted by a mutual  
friend,  
finding that we shared  
a favourite song,  
or that we're social  
democrats,

or that neither of us  
can stand  
the sight of blood;

then again, it may have been something  
random,  
her seated in the row  
just ahead,  
in a theatre  
with a paltry slope,  
her failure to remove the hat  
that blocked my view,  
my gathering the brazen courage  
to tap her shoulder,  
whisper into her ear  
that I'm unable to see a thing.



**My Cat is Half-Greek,  
or Zeus left the Acropolis open again**

My cat communes  
with the mythical, with the infinite  
and glorious invisible,  
getting an inside track  
on the weather  
and when the sky's  
about to change its tune.

My cat leaps up and tells me  
*whenever* it's about to rain,  
by the way she wiggles her whiskers  
and tilts her head  
beside the bathroom wall.

My cat instinctively knows  
when it's going to pour  
in Noachian proportions,  
when the neighbours  
will pound the door  
and beseech us to let them in,  
their basements flooded  
and the water still rising.

Silly cat, tumbling around  
with slanted head  
and twitching whiskers –

I'm only turning on the shower.  
Go back to your bed of sleep –  
and *dream*  
of chasing moths  
in the garden,  
the sun brighter  
than an Orion Nova  
and your shadow in pursuit  
as you run.

Let's not talk of storms today  
despite the warnings  
you sense from above:

Perhaps those sounds you hear  
are the thunderous applause  
from the pantheons up from their seats,  
as Taurus snags the matador;

the rumbling  
that of Hercules in hunger,  
starving for the love of Deianeira,  
she who brings his eyes  
to overflow  
with spit and drizzle,

a few simple sobs  
to remind us men and beasts  
that the deities too  
feel that which pains us all,  
blotting out the sun  
when there's none to share  
their sorrow.

Or it may only be Aphrodite  
calling you in  
for your dinner,  
unaware you have a home  
with *me*,  
cavorting with the mortals  
since we bow to your meows  
and your purrs,  
our closest, intimate link  
to both the eternal  
and the divine.

## **Tiles**

There was a time  
we showered together –  
saving water  
wasn't the reason.

Now I let a dozen  
tepid streams  
strike the tiles,  
fall to waste,

rinse the empty spaces  
where your hands  
and breasts  
should be.

## Upon Our Awakening

Upon our awakening,  
you ask why men  
want sex  
first thing in the morning.

It was merely a kiss  
on your arm.  
You read a tad  
too much  
into it,  
not *good morning love*,  
*did you sleep well?*  
but *dear god*  
*I need to fuck*  
like a dam about to burst  
or that final moment  
on earth,  
when you only have seconds  
to live,  
before the fabled flash of light,  
then cinders.

## **Before You Die**

*Before You Die*, it seems,  
has been springing up in bookstores  
all over the place.

“1001 Movies to See Before You Die” –  
double-faced in Performing Arts.

“1001 *Places* to See Before You Die” –  
yields a tepid trudge to Travel.

And every genre,  
it seems, has its own  
Arabian Nights-inspired thing to do  
*before* the hooded hangman calls:

“1001 Foods to Eat *Before You Die*”

“1001 Albums to Hear *Before You Die*”

“1001 Books to Read

*Before*

*You*

*Die.*”

It’s worth noting  
that with all this talk of death,  
the titles continue to fly  
and booksellers can scarcely keep up.

Maybe that's due to the fact  
that you're never, ever told  
exactly *how* you'll die,  
for it's unlikely you'll see:

"1001 Dances to Learn  
*Before You Develop Cancer*"

or

"1001 Liqueurs to Drink  
*Before You Get Hit by a Train*"

OR

"1001 Puzzles to Solve  
*Before You Get Shot in the Head.*"

Perhaps we prefer that Death  
keep its *own* swell of incense,  
its *own* black curtain,  
its *own* cryptic crossword,  
one not deciphered  
by reader or writer alike.

But why that extra *one* after *one thousand*?  
That little bonus, as a P.S. or encore –  
to make amends  
for the penultimate trip or film?

Where you're much too anxious  
about your impending expiry  
to *enjoy* that stroll in Oahu ...  
too *perturbed* about your nearing demise  
to *laugh* through *A Day at the Races* ...

and only Banks' *allusion*  
to *The Sweet Hereafter*  
will make that final book  
even tolerable.



## **St. Christopher's Playground**

That boy  
who plays alone  
is a future poet,

the way he throws the ball  
against the wall  
betrays it best:

a bounce against the bricks  
and rolling past  
the other kids –

none to pick it up  
for him, landing in the mud.

Look at how he cleans it:  
his sleeves absorb the earth,  
the water,  
the melding of the two.

See its mock rotation,  
still wet with residue,  
its slow and soggy spin  
cupped by his wobbly,  
sodden hands,

giving time  
for phantom people  
to get off,

the ones that stay behind  
to write the reason  
they cannot jump.

**Leaving the Dance Early  
to Watch a Vintage Musical on TV**

I said we'd dance  
like Fred & Ginger,  
Gene & Judy,

that some lessons  
weren't needed,

but forgive my blustered  
boast,  
my off-timed, two-step trips,  
my squishing of your shoes  
and turn-and-fall;

I'll prepare  
a popcorn snack,  
keep the candles all aglow,  
and the swing of black & white  
will give your throbbing toes  
a break;

we'll see that love  
between the couples  
never weakens in the hush,  
the quelling of the band  
or the steady click that tells them  
that the needle's out of grooves.

## **Penny-Farthing**

You sense I'm not impressed  
with your selection.

It's antique, you say  
and British at that.

I will not be seen  
on such a bicycle as this,  
its front wheel a mammoth  
and its rear a mere mouse.

Unloved by me it will wilt,  
from encroaching rust  
and loathing,  
like the bicycle built for two  
which you despised,  
the one I acquired  
for a pittance and a pence,  
dreaming we had desire  
by which to ride,  
turning corners  
without a care.

## On Solving the New York Times

The broken bits of pencil  
only spoke of your frustration,  
and it wasn't from the headlines,  
the *Pax Americana* and things  
pertaining to Bush.

Your seething led you stomping  
to my door,  
to the greying goatee clippings  
left unswept. To the empty bottle of rye  
I'd purposely hid, miserably.  
To every quip and inane joke  
expressed at breakfast.  
The Cream of Wheat is burnt  
and *I should have made it myself*.

You play it taciturn,  
and I go out for a timely jog,  
feigning smiles to the neighbours  
in case they heard us fight.

Darling, do a complex  
crossword  
just for *me*. Squeeze in words  
not yet invented.  
Damn the dictionaries  
to a mangled heap.

Scribble

"I never loved you anyway"  
and find a synonym for *lies*,  
in your thesaurus,  
before that too is discarded  
as my heart  
in *seven down*,  
*twelve across*.

## **Initials**

After you left,  
I carved our initials  
into the stump of a fallen tree.  
I tallied its age before death,  
thought of its stunted remnant  
as a trunk, soaring  
to swirling heights, with arms  
that housed the bliss of many birds,  
our love now wrapped in the rings  
that spoke of years, to a time  
when heart and bark and wing  
were very much alive.

## The Ruse of Mild Air

In this warmer than normal winter,  
the trees are budding early,  
in February's  
rain instead of snow.

I feel I ought to go outside  
and *bring* some soothing tea,  
*play* a tranquil song  
for harp and strings,

be the sandman for a spell,  
*send* the rousing leaves-to-be  
*back* into their shells,

lest the winds return from the north,  
puddles freeze over,  
and greening branches waken  
to a bird-less lie of ice.



**Fabric Carnations,  
or My Dog was a Vegetarian**

The flowers in my house are a fraud,  
marigolds that never wither,  
forsythia forever fake  
with vibrant yellow  
that doesn't fade,  
daisies dotted about  
as if I had an eternal supply,  
the faint of sight  
and squinters  
never guessing  
the awful truth,  
nor those who call, congested,  
unaware  
they're counterfeit.

For years, *before* I built  
what's bogus,  
this simulated sham of silk,  
every bluebell, phlox and lily  
were rich in wondrous  
redolence,

concealing the smell of "Spot" –  
my shaggy, shedding dog  
with neither blotch  
nor original name,

who'd eat the roses  
when in season,  
plucking petals  
when backs were turned.

The dog was mine for a decade,  
had a couch he claimed as his own,  
an old stuffed cat  
with which he played  
but never thought  
to bite or chew.

When he died,  
I was told to go back  
to blooms, genuine,  
the ones that I'd discarded  
after "Spot" had overate,

rid the rooms of imitations,  
inhale the fragrant scent  
of life.

It's *all* a fabrication  
I replied: aromas  
from the freshly  
cut, telling the world  
they're bleeding,

their beauty-in-a-vase,  
embalming;

that flowers too  
love living  
as much as a man  
or departed pet,

that my *forgeries*  
are better,  
no perfumes  
to pronounce what's dead.

## **The Season Arrived in Birdsong**

The season arrived in birdsong,  
in snowbanks receding like glaciers,  
their slow and dripping melt  
under a radiant sage of sun  
eager to redeem itself  
for its many days of absence,  
its inability to warm us  
when we needed it most,  
and winter's cruel colding  
instilling an innate experience  
of Pleistocene hunters and mammoths,  
of being bound inside our caves,  
of venturing into the ice and wind  
while we dreamt of distant greening.

## The Lesser Light

“Then God made two great lights:  
the greater light to rule the day,  
and the lesser light to rule the night”

— Genesis 1:16

No one writes of the moon of day,  
the one that’s overshadowed  
by the brilliance of the sun,

the one that sits in blue,  
that’s pale and white as cloud,

its craters scarcely noticed  
and its phases gone unchecked.

At noon, lovers holding hands  
do so in a golden light,  
beams that warm the faces  
locked in smiles from solar shine.

While ignored at 4pm,  
our satellite must reckon  
that its time is slowly coming,  
when its giant, yellow rival  
will sink *below* horizon’s line.

And it is *then*,  
when couples feel a chill,  
that Luna's lamp aglow  
alights their footsteps and their kiss,

*casts* a suitor's shadow  
'neath a window washed in song,

that daughters eye its pockmarks  
from their fathers' telescopes,

that poets pen their verses  
for this orb of wolf and tide,

that nature finds its way through dark  
in the shroud of a sleeping sun.

## Early Morning Rain

In the yard,  
you felt sorry for the slug  
that crept so slowly up the stem  
of one of your greens.

*Poor thing,  
it doesn't even have a shell  
to call a home.*

Afterward,  
I compared it with its cousin,  
the snail, several of which will  
gather in the garden  
after an early morning rain –

sturdy,  
in the swirly cave it carries  
on its back,  
a place to retract its head in  
when it pours,

feigning it isn't there, perhaps,  
should a desperate, homeless mollusk  
come to call,  
knowing there *isn't*  
any room  
for two,

and yet burdened  
by that extra weight,  
its inability to travel  
wherever it may wish,  
at its turtle-like, sloth-like pace,  
like a car that's always pulling  
a camper/trailer,

never having the mettle  
to face the world  
when things get tough,  
even ducking in its hovel  
when there isn't a cloud  
in the sky.



## The Language of Sparrows

Your sister is dead.

We plant seedlings  
by her grave in April,  
when Spring seduces  
with all its promise,  
moisten the ground  
with a jug of water  
and say how, years from now,  
a bush will burst and flower,  
be home to a family of sparrows,  
each knowing the other by name.

I ask you if birds have names,  
like *Alice, Brent, Jessica* and *James*,  
if mother and father bird  
call them in when it rains,  
say *settle here in branches*  
*amid the leaves that keep you dry* –  
not in English, mind you,  
or any other human tongue  
but in the language of sparrows;  
each trill, each warbling,  
a repartee,  
a crafted conversation of the minds.

I then notice  
that we never see the birds  
when it rains,  
how they disappear in downpours,  
seeking shelter  
in something we simply cannot see.

When we're old,  
when we come to remember  
the loved one that you've lost,  
they'll be shielded in our shrub,  
not a short and stunted one,  
but a *grand*, blessed growth,  
like the one that spoke to Moses,  
aflame, uttering  
I AM WHO I AM,

one that towers,  
dense with green,  
a monument  
to the sister you treasured  
and to the birds  
that she adored,  
naming the formerly fallowed, *hallowed*,  
sacred, *remove your shoes*,  
Spirits and Sparrows dwell  
and sibilate secrets  
we're unworthy to hear.

## **As Spring Yields to Summer**

I only see her when she's out,  
the woman across the way,  
pushing her lawnmower  
that has no engine,  
the grating of squeaky wheels,  
its whirling, rusty blades,  
the sound of a hundred haircuts.  
A fumeless, slicing symphony,  
the grass wafting fresh  
and green.

Day and night  
through my windowsill  
and all is  
as it should be:

cat eyes narrow to slits  
at the first burst of light,  
squirrels play tag,  
bumblebees collect, send static  
through the afternoon,

dogs howl at three-quarter moons  
and backyard Copernicans  
marvel  
at the shadows on lunar scars.

A couple kiss and rock  
on gently swinging seats,  
embrace, sigh into sleep,  
and dawn comes back again,  
announced by startled yawns  
and singing larks.

As Spring yields to Summer,  
tulips slump head-first,  
vibrancy fades, reds go rose,  
goldenrod yellows,  
joining the ordinary  
around us.

There's my neighbour  
riding his bicycle, narrowly missed  
by a milk truck,  
Ms. April May receiving delivery,  
twice weekly, half a quart,  
that, and measurements  
long thought dead  
still heaving  
their penultimate breath.

## Why I Refuse to Write a Sonnet

If you were to give an ape  
enough time, behind a typewriter  
I've heard,  
it will compose an English sonnet –  
via the laws of chance  
and average,  
a billion trillion years  
if needed,  
defying the rules of death,  
decomposition,  
in the process.

If granted a span  
of the same duration,  
I wonder if I'd fare any better,  
constantly failing  
in bumbling attempts  
at the alternating  
rhymes and schemes,  
*confusing* all the a's with the c's  
and then forgetting  
what *quatrain*  
should be.

Although,  
if I were honest,  
I'd say it has *nothing* to do  
with technique,

that my inability  
is tied to its subject,  
the *what*  
that inspires the write,  
or to be more precise,  
the *who* –

your face and your body  
untouched by my hands  
as I type and I type and I type.

## Saturday

The backyard birds  
have competition.

I came here  
to hear them,  
their morning melody,  
rousing like a symphony  
with a wind-blown branch  
as baton,  
small and so frail,  
severed off a tree  
by a sunrise gust  
from the south.

The men next door  
are re-roofing their house,  
hammering shingles  
while their radio blares  
a wicked country brew:  
a cacophony of twang  
and Texas drawl,  
with *she's-a leavin' me*  
*behind in muh tears*  
accompanied by their raucous  
talk and the snap  
of beer-in-a-can.

I pluck weeds from the garden,  
ears straining  
for the inimitable notes  
of nature,  
wishing the robins  
could drown  
the pedal steel,  
the pedestrian  
commercial pap,

that their crescendo  
devour  
the chorus of nails  
and *woe-is-me*,

stain the fresh-laid black  
with white  
when they are finished.



## Weeping for the Rain

Nobody plays  
in the rain.

There are  
no bundled children  
making rainmen  
in the yard,

no one on the pond  
*figure-swimming*,  
skimming pucks,

no angels made of rain  
imprinted  
on the hillside green,

no cups of hand-held water  
tossed about  
around the schools.

I saw a smiling youngster  
catching raindrops  
with her tongue,  
promptly scolded  
by her mother  
to wait for winter's  
flakes of white.

And so it goes –  
the splash of boots in puddles  
nixed by fears  
of catching cold,  
the rain adored by flowers  
and the ones who reap and sow,

all the others  
fearing the wet  
of water's drop,  
umbrellas  
never opened in the snow,

the rain regretting  
the warmth  
of mild air,  
the love it could have had  
in a child's  
touch.

**11/3/11**

Blossoms  
were the first to fall,  
in the rumble  
that ruptured the calm,

and the land was shaken  
as a globe of snow  
in the hands of a beaming  
child,

and window and wall  
were cast to the earth  
like an expulsion  
from heaven of old,

boats and cars  
both raced in the rush  
of a fleeting, fatal  
sea,

and the homes of Sendai  
buckled,  
as an origami's  
fold,

were carried  
with all the dead,  
in the swell that defied  
the tide,

and the sirens screamed  
of fire,  
reactors wailed  
of melt,

while the callous sun  
descended,  
teased millions  
with its kiss of light.

## **September 11th**

When we set a date  
for coffee,  
you picked Tuesday,  
September 11th;

and now I don't think  
of espressos,  
of bagels or a patio chat,  
only airplanes exploding,  
towers imploding,  
a war on terror  
launched.

I want my September  
11th back,  
without the carnage  
that now comes with it.

I want its return  
as a late summer day,  
with a sun  
that warms our arms  
still bared  
by breezy, short-sleeved  
shirts,

with the kids settled in  
at school,  
first-day jitters  
all behind,

a time to stroll  
through country fairs,  
red and yellow  
coding games of chance.

## Sing

Don't drop streaking tears  
from your blurring, tissue eyes  
at the death you think has consumed me.  
Don't serenade my tombstone  
with your weeping violins  
or *play* a sombre requiem  
for my god-forsaken soul.

Laugh out loud in lieu,  
not in metaphor but for real;  
I'm just beyond your touch  
but not your still and silent sight;  
see me in the spectrum  
as the glass breaks down the colours:

sweating, pitching leather baseballs  
in a lot in Tennessee,  
arguing with the umpire,  
throwing spitters past the plate;  
and on days I'm feeling calmer,  
serving ice cream cones to children  
on a Sunday at Stanley Park;  
and just beyond the tree line  
in the north,  
when I'm a little more daring,  
burning a trail  
on a snowmobile,

scraping bones  
from frozen ground.

On a clear black night over Chile,  
I'm mapping out the stars,  
listening for radio waves,  
sending signals of my own:

that I  
was never lost  
but never found,  
that I'm more than just a body  
and the sum of all its parts,  
that my poems can really breathe  
out on their own,  
for all our benefit –

yours, mine, and the cross-eyed,  
baby girl in Lisbon.

Dial proper frequencies  
for pick-up.  
Hear me sing a lullaby,  
softly,  
in Portuguese.



## The Wisdom of Rice

*Don't pity the rice*  
Aunt Josephine  
had said,  
during her usual mirth  
and merriment,  
and we wondered  
what she'd meant.

Now, with news  
of her earthly passing,  
her mantra is remembered  
and its meaning,  
made clear:

*Rice, my children,  
will likely fall to the floor  
as it's poured,  
a grain that's grown  
for nothing  
and yet it grows,  
in tawny fields and tall,  
the height of pride  
and triumph;*

*not concerned if it's crushed  
by a farmer's boots  
or spit aside in mills;*

*neither worried if stuck  
to the bottom of pots  
nor wedged between the teeth  
of a fork;*

*and, if it's not to be consumed  
as food,  
it will leap in the air  
in a second of joy,*

*to be trodden  
by a bridegroom's shoe,  
perhaps caught  
in a wedded wife's veil,*

*swept in a pan  
by a janitor's broom,*

*resume its endless celebration  
with the dust.*

## Nine

There's a beauty to our numbers  
that I note with admiration:

the shape of cipher 6  
and its curving, crescent close;

8, with its weaving, double loop  
that skaters strive and scratch to mimic;

3, and its ability to complete,  
to divide as trilogy, to *manifest*  
as Trinity;

1 which finds the wholeness  
in *itself*, never wishing to *flee*  
its core or essence,  
for the sake of multiplying:

*One times one times one  
will always equal one.*

2 is the sum of love  
and the most romantic of all  
our digits,  
and in terms of teaching math,  
it gives a break to all our children:

*Two times two is four,  
and the answer's the same  
when adding.*

7 is Biblical,  
the week for God's creation,  
the length of telling tales  
of *Harry Potter*,  
of *Narnia*,  
the complement of 12.

5, the Books of Moses,  
the fingers and thumb  
on our hands,  
giving us ability,  
the gift of grasp  
and molding, making shapes  
from slabs of clay.

4, a pair of couplets,  
the voice of poems  
and song, the rhythm  
and march of the saints.

Yet when I come to number 9,  
my spirit starts to sink:

it has such *lofty* expectations,  
aspiring to reach new levels,  
only to fall so painfully short –

missing the mark of 10  
by just a meagre, single stroke;  
always being known for  
“almost there,”  
remembered for the glory  
it could have gained  
but never got,  
its cousins –  
19, 49, 69 –  
bearing the brunt  
of all its failings.

99 is but a stepping stone,  
a grating *lapse* towards 100,  
a number we only *watch* while it rolls,  
a humble *countdown* to celebration,  
unable to give us merit on its own.

I spent all of '99  
*yearning* for 2000,  
anticipating a new millennium,

the fears, excitement  
we thought awaited us  
in a dawning, changing world,

never enjoying the year for what it was,  
practicing the writing  
of an exotic date –

January 1, 2000

and eager to see  
the masthead of that early morning paper,

ridding myself of the nines  
that only accentuate defeat,

thinking I'll *pass* some kind of threshold,  
a singing, flowered archway  
bidding *come, enter,*  
*leave what troubles you*  
*behind.*

## The Decoy

My hunter friend,  
the one I haven't converted  
to my "animals-have-feelings-too"  
frame of mind,  
uses  
a wooden decoy  
in an attempt  
to lure some ducks,

the painted, smiling duplicate  
successful  
in its duty:  
three already shot today,  
bagged and ready to carve.

If objects had living souls,  
I wonder how it would feel:

a *traitor*,

causing the *death*  
of what it mimics,

floating on water  
like a wannabe bird,  
even feign it could fly  
if it *wanted* to,

have its pick  
of choicest mates;

like *Pinocchio*,  
eager to be turned  
into the real thing,

hoping its rifle-bearing  
Gepetto  
will make it  
flesh and bone,  
allow  
a brook of blood to pump  
throughout  
its winding veins,

pray it might *even*  
bring salvation  
to this hunter's  
calloused heart,

spot a chance  
at its own redemption,

have its maker  
see its feathered shape  
as something  
more than food.



## **The Pitiful Crow**

The pitiful crow,  
its grating caw  
competing with  
the blissful song of birds,  
its attempt to join the choir  
thankfully shunned.

If the finch and robin's  
warble  
is accompaniment to harp,  
the lilt for ascending sun,  
then the crow in all its blackness  
is a heavy metal shriek,  
the violent jolt of blinding  
rays-in-eyes.

You'll never find a record  
filled with crows,  
a disc akin to woodwinds  
all off-key,  
a hungry baby's cry  
or a parrot's vexing squawk  
before its mimic.

Only deathly shadows  
give their blessing to the crows,  
call them *brother bird*  
and *sister winged*,

their lot among the headstones  
of the gone,  
and the ones who hear  
the reaper's nearing thresh,  
the drowning of the starlings'  
call of dawn.

## Raking Leaves with Anneliese

She holds open  
ruptured bags  
as I heave  
loads of coloured  
leaves  
into their crinkled,  
paper mouths  
like a backhoe  
dropping dirt  
into a pit.

*The Stasi  
took my father  
into the night,  
she firmly sighs.  
I sent letters  
to the prison  
but I never heard  
a word.*

I note golden,  
scarlet foliage,  
fallen  
like unpicked apples.  
Some have twisting  
worms, limp  
as flimsy laces

on my loosely-knotted  
shoes.

She says *mother*  
*stayed in sackcloth,*  
*with a veil*  
*that wouldn't lift*  
*in public places.*

November's  
biting wind  
scatters half  
our work away,  
our faces  
turning numb  
in waning light.

## **Hildegard's Tomb**

I offered to go with you,  
to the mausoleum,  
thinking you'd said "museum,"  
believing we'd gaze at vases  
and cracking busts  
made by the dead;  
instead we entered a corridor  
filled with corpses filed in rows,  
inscriptions engraved  
by the living  
in a climate-controlled  
grave,  
and I wondered which was better  
in terms of art,  
immortality.

## **November Rose**

It's a Jane or Johnny-come-lately,  
the solitary rose in my garden,  
a harvest holdover or belated bloom  
that's risen when the others have died.

It has none to compete for attention,  
isn't lost in a sea of red.

I ponder its predicament,  
think of it as lonely,  
regretting it didn't blossom sooner  
when the buzz of flying insects  
were droning their affection.

I'll water it in the evening,  
as stars speck the sky in Autumn's cool.  
I'll sing it to sleep  
as I retire,  
pray for grace  
should the frost strike swift.

## Like Darwin Among the Gods

Christmas, and the word became flesh  
on our scribbled, Scrabble board,  
an empty bottle of wine  
and a record strumming chords so calm  
in lieu of breeze or fire.

"Calvinist" to your "random,"  
with "stop" and "go"  
branching out,  
feebly, with little imagination  
or points.

And we discuss  
the interconnectedness  
of all things,  
how life is tangible –  
dependent on dice and chance;  
how the meeting of hearts  
is coldly decided  
by the lefts and the rights,  
the ins and the outs,  
of daily mundane doings.

Look, a physicist is born  
because a young cashier has smiled  
at a complete and foreign stranger;

had he foregone the pack of gum  
you say, he'd have married another woman,  
who'd bear a son  
that serves hard time –  
20 years, no parole, no remorse.

Watch the atoms collide at will  
and all the faces disappear;  
observe the cells dividing,  
for they too will reach dry land.

When Reverend Tucker  
quotes the scriptures, he says  
"I ain't no ape."  
Show him how his sins hold fast,  
how he fails the Lord of mercy,  
how he strains at gnats – eats camels,  
ignores the tailbone of his ass.

If I leave you, my love,  
at 10:03, I'll make it home in peace,  
write a tender song for you,  
how your scarlet locks are streams,  
flowing to and fro' in dreams.

You'll be enchanted,  
consider my proposal,  
say "yes" for all it's worth.



But please, don't let me tarry,  
say a word or phrase ill-thought:  
for if I go at 10:04,  
I'll catch a damned red light,  
my car side-swiped by drunkards,  
my chest pinned to the wheel,  
legs crushed,  
spirit floating somewhere  
to a place of God's own choosing.

And it is there, as Dante warned,  
amid the howls and shrieks of loss,  
I'll die a second cosmic time  
from a flash of what would  
and should have been;  
your breath pulsing on in bliss,  
the ignorance of the not-yet-dead.

## Bread, Blessing of Birds and Widows

In the park,  
one of the pigeons  
stands by the wayside,  
watching the others  
devour the bread  
you've shred and tossed  
about our feet.

*She's in grief*, you say to me  
with conviction,  
recalling my scolding  
from an hour ago  
(for your leaving your lunch uneaten).

You add that her mate was likely killed  
by a lunging cat,  
or maybe its wing was fractured  
and it took days to die,  
unable to fathom  
why the sky  
suddenly seemed so far away,  
indifferent  
to its laboured hops,  
its failure to seize  
what was cast:

seeds of melon, sunflower,  
bits of broken crust.

## Just Friends

In this, your final visit,  
we talk of “only friends”  
and the other silly things  
that make us turn  
and look away,  
from each other’s eyes,  
when neither you nor I  
would want it this way.

And I change the subject  
rather hastily,  
when you ask  
*am I still pretty?*  
Its catch twenty-two  
stares me in the face  
when I speak in lieu  
of suitcase bombs  
and bio wars  
that make for front page fodder.

*I don’t want to die unloved*  
you say and I agree,  
and a gas bar clerk  
is shot five times  
as if once  
won’t do the trick,

bread lines grow in Montreal  
and the Budget calls for higher tax  
that moms can never give;

and Jihad's called again,  
stocks are set to crash,  
and I think you're just as pretty  
as the day we danced to Liszt,

and I speak of strikes instead,  
of whales harpooned  
and seals still killed for fur,  
of famines in Angola  
and that nukes are everywhere,

and I'd like to kiss you now  
but I'm too afraid to try  
and land mines blow six kids  
apart  
and ain't it great  
to be alive.

## **Fish Out of Water**

It's no one else's business, Martha,  
why you did what you did,  
or why you made the mistake  
of stepping out of bounds  
where geeks with glasses  
should never dare to tread.

Perhaps you got tired  
of sharing your lunch  
with the Chess Club,  
or wolfing down a sandwich  
amid a hurried rush to the library  
lest some thought you friendless  
if you stayed in the cafeteria  
to eat alone.

An "L" on the forehead  
may only come off with gasoline,  
but why torch the whole house  
and take your parents with you?  
Why not leave them  
to find you in a state of grace,  
yielding to the punishment  
that served them best?

Why not drop a pompom  
at your feet,

letting them recall the day  
the ugliest girl in school  
tried out for cheerleading,  
so they may indeed know  
at least *one* reason  
why they saw you swinging  
from the end of a ragged noose,  
your diary turned to a blank page  
where your first kiss should have been?

## Psalm for Aquarius

In the days and nights  
of my naiveté,  
when hope blasted blue  
in carbon cloud,  
the constellations  
stepped out of line,  
formed new patterns,  
gave my dreams names  
that they'd discarded:

*Pisces, someday she'll adore you,  
hold your hanging head  
beside her breast,  
pluck out poisoned hooks  
inside your heart.*

And of love, it lost  
its battle with beauty,  
lives on to cut to the quick,  
chain the *soul*  
in heavy iron,  
to thrash hopelessly,  
like fish in a sweeping net,  
then hauled to shore  
while salvation ripples beneath,  
so cold in all its glory.

## Another Hallmark Moment

On Valentine's,  
I didn't think of hearts  
but of shamrocks,  
of St. Patrick,  
the lush and Kelly greens  
of the Irish,  
the luck that clovers bring.

So leave your blood-filled, beating  
organ at the door  
and your chocolates, flowers, with it.  
Let me pine for almost Spring  
and a romp under leaves,  
through grasses.  
You can have your snowy day  
and diamonds, pearls, to go.  
You can have your lover's kiss  
and night of heated sex –

No, I'm lying.  
Forgive me, Triune God,  
and Mr. & Mrs. O'Shea.  
Your time has not yet come,  
for I need to *hold* and *be* held,  
love and *be* loved and *make* love,  
and dream of Dublin another day,  
another month, when the vestige of red  
has melted with the white.



## Past Life Aggression

Perhaps I was a ruthless *Khan*,  
vengeful, without mercy,  
who cut down peasants  
by the thousands,  
taking an unsheathed sword  
to young mothers and their babes;

or I may have dwelt in dungeons,  
coaxing heretics to confess,  
beat remorse from wicked witches  
and any soul who wouldn't kneel  
at the foot of the pious, Papal throne.

Was I simply just a gadabout  
who cheated on his wife? A *rogue*  
who left his children  
for the warmth of a harlot's touch?

Did I ridicule the Crown,  
crudely scrawl on Cambridge walls?

Did my horse  
trample *Queen Anne's Lace*?  
Had I ignored its defecation?

My dearest, would-be betrothed,

is the reason for your “no”  
the fact I deserted my troops in the war?  
Had I fled from German flags,  
escaped an ambush out of fear?

Or was I incredibly initiative instead –  
start a firestorm in Dresden,  
drop a Nagasaki nuke?

Did I watch as the Chinese starved,  
give my approval to the Red Star State?

If so, please forgive me my transgressions:  
taking the Name  
of the Lord in vain;  
my callous *killings* of the innocent;  
my drunken, playboy ways.

Impart to me your pardon,  
your blessed, fragrant kiss –  
not the one that Judas gave  
but the caress of *Juliet*,  
the embrace of *Bouguereau*, eternal;  
the one that ends the cycle, trips  
karma at the finish line.

## The Sapling

After years of talk and deferral,  
this is the Spring  
I planted the sapling,  
the one to be our tree (*albeit* a little too late).

And someday in our future,  
when we're much too old to climb,  
too frail to sup in its shade,

in wheelchairs, perhaps, we'll be,  
seeing its bounty  
unfold by the window,  
from inside a pane of glass:

an umbrella of sheltering leaves,  
a cathedral for choral birds,  
a path for dashing squirrels;

and when we're gone,  
when another man and woman  
dwell within our past abode,  
its bark will await the touch,  
engraving, from this couple's supple hands  
(*without* procrastination),

tender as our own in times  
when love and seed were one.

## Hearing Ted Hughes at Plunkenworth's

Our friend dropped in again,  
the one who always says  
he's met some rather famous poets,  
like Billy Collins, Rita Dove,  
Molly Peacock,  
boasting he's taken them out for beer,  
that in their drunken state  
they've read his work  
and said it was the best damn thing  
they've ever seen on paper.

It's been difficult to prove him a liar,  
authors and their tours  
have coincided with his claims  
but this time he was sloppy,  
saying he'd heard Ted Hughes  
last night, at Plunkenworth's,  
the run-down, downtown gallery  
that exhibits skateboard  
art and molds of vomit  
by its barely-on-its-hinges  
front door.

He's been dead more than two decades,  
we said, snickering, knowing we finally  
found the lie,  
that he'd admit it's been a charade,

the name-dropping, the tales  
of autographed books  
(that we've *never* been allowed  
to see).

But he didn't blink an eye,  
unfazed, undaunted in his delivery,  
saying that Ted had read  
a dozen new poems,  
one about Plath,  
how he would have *rushed*  
to save her,  
turn off the oven,  
inhaled the toxic fumes  
himself  
if he only could,  
calling it "Sylvie's Stove,"  
and we corrected him,  
saying it was *Sylvia*, not *Sylvie*  
and he said no,  
that was an affectionate name  
he had for her, very French  
as he really loved the language,

that he'd come back from the grave  
just to read it,

even if but a single person  
listened, believed  
that he was sorry,

that the dead  
could be so sorry.

## **The Birth of Lovely Veronica**

On the morning you were born,  
covered with film,  
coated with the remnants  
of your cocooned state in the womb,  
a knife was lodged  
in Thomas Murphy's chest,  
stopping his heart  
with the hardness of steel,  
and the thug who cruelly robbed him  
ran into a sheeted night  
of just-fallen rain,  
in that nebulous wetness  
that remains  
before wind and air  
dry each drop to nothingness.

On the morning you were born,  
you cried your first cry,  
and Kim Yung cowered  
in a solitary cell,  
awaiting another visit  
from the torturers,  
the ones who never forget  
Tiananmen Square  
or his shoutings  
that Mao was dead.  
He wishes *he* were dead,

that someone on this earth  
gave a goddamn,  
that today they'd just finish the job.

This morning, when you were born,  
a Sudanese mother  
cradled  
her skin/bone son,  
rocked him  
in her shrivelled arms,  
sang *return you now to Heaven*  
in her own, raspy tongue  
while nurses cleaned *you* off,  
prepared you for our smiles,  
our initial touch and kisses,  
our deceiving ourselves  
and the world  
that you're in a safer, *better* place  
than a mother's cave of calm  
or the planes of ghosts  
and Gods.



## Francesca, Weeding the Garden

My daughter, all of six  
and bursting with a Big Bang  
sort of energy,  
zigzags across our fenced backyard,  
picking dandelions she holds  
in her fist,  
for an "I love you daddy" bouquet,  
like the lofty ones  
I snagged for her mother  
before the tumors took her away,  
their sunny heads of yellow  
jutting freely from curling fingers,  
my steady, sturdy voice  
now a downcast, trembling shell,  
saying *they last a little longer*  
*than flowers,*  
*we'll wish you better*  
*when they turn to spores.*

**On Our Search for Leonard Cohen  
and Maybe One of His Many Lovers**

*If I am dumb beside your body  
while silence blossoms like tumors on our lips  
it is because I hear a man climb stairs  
and clear his throat outside our door*

— Leonard Cohen, from "Poem"  
in *Let Us Compare Mythologies*

The expenditure is worth it  
you contend,  
hundreds for a train  
that stank of fish,  
a hotel with no TV,  
the cost of wine and dining  
and the tip we never left,  
lapping lukewarm lattes  
under awnings of cafés.

Yes, I too have heard the stories  
of his coming,  
every so often,  
to his haunts in Montréal,  
the *bridge* that spans the river  
though we argue on which one,

the kiosk in the market  
where *Suzanne* was given birth,  
amid the lemons  
and yellow beans,  
the singer seeing the sun  
in all those tints  
and tones of fruit,  
how its setting were tangerines,  
the moon a whitish melon  
giving muse.

I dispute your speculation,  
say the woman  
the tune was named for  
didn't cook  
or squeeze a lime,  
that you've confused her  
with someone else,  
a silent, unnamed mistress  
from a stanza  
of his *Poem*.

We can always look  
for *her*,  
her features gone to prune,  
dentures getting stuck  
on autumn apples,

purple *veins*  
about her calves  
and swollen feet  
that scrape the ground  
around her cane,

never  
measuring up  
to *Marianne*,  
her existence  
only words  
without a song.

## Friendship

Unlike bells of marriage,  
friendship has no pomp,  
is without a clergy's blessing,  
is void of ceremony  
and a contract signed with quills,  
has *no* pronounced beginning  
though it can end  
with prevailing winds:

blown like *dust*  
with gossip's tongue,  
cast as *dross*  
with a secret's leak.

Friendship grows as a fetus,  
limbs and eyes  
and pumping heart  
fully birthed  
when it is ready:

though without  
the labour pains,  
those instead are saved  
for its untimely,  
grievous loss –

through sudden death  
or mounting lies  
or the tremors  
of earthly change,

the “going our separate ways”  
that sometimes circumstances  
state –

no one’s willful *fault*  
but stretching time.

And *when* a friendship ends,  
there *are* no funeral rites,  
no eulogy draped in black,  
no tomb to house its body  
or chiseled dates  
inscribed in stone.

There *is* a pool of promise,  
*baptismal* font  
and passage,

when *listening*  
grasps our hearing,  
holds a clenched  
and shaking hand,

when a hug  
bestows its comfort  
and a shoulder  
absorbs the tears;

confirmation  
of a *whispering* kind,  
a *pledge* to rise  
past selfish:

a never-too-busy-to call,  
a wobbly, winter skate,  
a bowl of steaming soup  
when one is sick  
and dearly missed.

## Strings of the Great Depression

In your chair,  
covered in a shawl to warm you,  
*hot* milk by your side,

arthritic, gnarled fingers  
pulling limply  
on elastics  
(ones that held  
your meds together),

you speak of your farmer-father,  
coming home  
without the radio  
he'd promised,

and of rubber bands,  
how he stretched them  
over a can,  
plucking them  
with his thumb.

*For music*, he said,  
*while you eat.*



## La Belle

*La pomme de terre,*  
the potato, the earth apple,  
its womb a warmth of ground,  
unable to tempt the eyes  
of unfallen man.

The apple, *la pomme,*  
kept cool among the branches  
by an evening's autumn sky,  
painted so very often,  
the centre of our lore.

In French they're more poetic,  
sounding  
that much better  
on the ear,  
no bitter taste  
that settles  
on the tongue,  
no judgement on their worth.

*Le poème,*  
the poem,  
that hovers in the vacant space  
between,  
the fruit of ground and tree,

the one I wish I'd render  
*en Français*,  
to mask the many flaws  
that come when beauty  
can't be seen.

## Seventy times Seven

Conjure, if you can,  
a world with no forgiveness,  
that cancels second chances,  
no *redemption*  
to be found,

mated  
the rest of our lives  
with first *dates*  
from junior high,

the original *yes or no*  
leaving no room  
to wriggle out of;

hair that doesn't grow back  
after the initial, single cut,  
the barber's trembling scissors  
defining the look you'll wear  
for life—

the stress of such decisions ...

to be denied  
a change of lanes, change of job,  
or *change* of style of clothes—

just wash and wear and underwear,  
your signature branded  
in cotton.

*To err is human*, they say,  
to forgive  
a divinity's kiss—  
but pity the child  
who swings and misses,  
denied a second strike,  
or the waitress spilling drinks,  
joining the *sinner*s at outer gates,

and the one who was to come,  
who would have *discerned*  
what cures our cancers,  
*expelled* from medical school  
for arriving a half-a-minute too late,  
the only warning issued  
at the time of registration,  
perfection the priority—  
for clocks here never run fast.

## América

The isthmus  
was the adhesive  
always holding us  
together,

like fraternal twins  
conjoined,  
locked  
by a crooked rib.

And *though* it looked  
quite thin,  
brittle and ready to  
snap,

the mightiest ships  
of imperial fleets  
could only  
turn away,

to round Cape  
Horn at a crawl,  
to meet Pacific waves.

*El Canal de Panamá*,  
christened in  
'14,

in the summer  
of the Serbian  
shot.

Yes,  
this brings us Yen  
and Yuan.

Yes,  
this hews in half  
the journey.

But brother,  
earthen-brother,

your breath  
is not as close,

and strangers  
sail the space  
between our scars.

## **Juanita**

The email labelled as “junk”  
by my vigilant catcher of spam  
says “dearest one”  
in the subject.

Though I wish it weren’t so,  
I confess I don’t recognize  
the sender,  
Juanita McTavish,  
of Spanish-Scottish descent  
no doubt.

She’s indicative  
of the many others  
who send me junk,  
all with unusual names  
that speak of cultural  
intercourse:

Vladimir Cobb, Horatio Singh,  
Mumanabe Parker,

all just saying “hello,”

or the pleas from the African rich,  
from the widow of Todd Buwakadu,  
who left so many millions

she doesn't know where the hell  
to put it.

I then decide to add  
all of the missed opportunities  
I've had,  
all of those British lottos I've won  
but never bothered to send in my claim,  
always *hastily* deleting the message  
because it's labelled *virus B.S.*;

why I've suffered through all my ailments  
when the cure is found in the link,  
the one so kindly included  
since my sex life  
is *Mannfred's* concern.

But getting back to the matters  
of heart,  
my Juanita's endearing message  
that's been clicked and purged, unread,  
I'll wait if another is sent,  
if I'm still her dearest one,  
and perhaps I'll take a chance,  
those one-in-a-million odds,  
ignore my email's discerning filter  
and see if tonight true love  
be mine.



**My lover hates Roy Clark  
but hasn't heard of Sufjan Stevens**

My composition of song,  
for you, has been rejected,  
not because the sentiments  
were bad, or the structure  
of verse and chorus,  
but that I played the chords  
on a banjo  
when I should have used a guitar.

You say the *banjo*  
is a trite,  
hee-hawed thing,  
for barefoot, hick-town loafers  
with dangling straw  
between their teeth.

I'd like to change the words,  
dedicate it to another,  
one who doesn't ridicule  
the music of the mountain,  
one who'd know its origins,  
before Burl Ives' arrival.

*Bania*,  
in the Mandingo tongue,

from the minstrels  
of the African west,  
whose moonlight lovers  
never shunned  
their poignant serenades.

## Socks

The *most* insulting reason  
you can give  
for declining an invitation  
is that you have to fold your socks  
(or maybe rearrange  
their drawer).

There's nothing exciting  
about socks.

They look plain silly  
in sandals,

wearing white  
a winter *faux pas*.

The only heed  
I pay them  
is when I check they're not  
mismatched.

I'd never give a pair  
on Christmas Eve,  
or Valentine's,  
or even Office Workers' Day;

and what they cannot  
and will not be,  
*aside* from a token of love,  
is an excuse from a family function  
or an escape from a date  
that's made,  
with the girl you think is too  
homely,

the one you'd like to flee from  
though you've never checked her out  
below the knees.

## **On Your Beauty**

And when the starling's song  
was heard  
along the trail we walked,  
it failed to draw my mind  
away from your  
melodic voice;

and when you wondered  
if you had such beauty,  
I said that yours was always there  
just like the things we take for granted:

the inch of sticking snow  
on naked trees;  
a prism bending light  
and splitting colour;  
that unexpected violet  
poking through  
the thawing ground;  
the wonderment of sound  
the time a harp  
is strummed on stage –

and your tenderness  
of touch,  
your slender arc  
of hips,

your fluttered blink of eyes  
and ease of laughter –

these, yes these,  
forever more so  
than the bids  
of birds and man.

## Adagio

The violin's colour  
has faded, like a novel  
in a bookshop window  
that's faced the sun  
for several weeks.

It was a brownish-  
red I'd say,  
*maroon* you'd call it,  
a double entendre no doubt,  
its body begotten  
of trees,  
its nylon voice a language  
transcending all  
that tongues have spoken.

You haven't even touched it  
in the three years  
since he died, the one  
you were to marry.  
But I sense you'll clasp it  
a final time,  
perhaps after gentle prodding,

to play the melody  
you once envisioned,  
not saying whom it is for,

though I really needn't ask,  
feign surprise  
at its dénouement:

a long and wailing coda,  
a flinging-into-wall,  
the splintered wood  
and silence  
entreating no applause.



## Trumpet Player

Trumpet player,  
hold your note against the backward mind  
of the corps of your oppressors,  
stomping off to office towers,  
cubicles and charts.

Do your solo  
on the spur,  
the squall of sound  
that lets us know  
the anger of your race,  
the family left behind  
in run-down walk-ups.

Sweat from your brow  
under hot blue light  
and rail against its calm.  
Tip the scales both low and high  
and do it poetically.

Trumpet player,  
play for *her*,  
the one you loved, now gone.  
Make it seem  
that flags have dropped  
with sailors dead at sea.

## Winter Solstice

Christmas  
with an ex-lover  
is spent whenever  
there's time to spare,

so *today* I invited you over,  
with the promise of friendship  
and fire,  
hoping for kindling wood,

but the flames are merely embers,  
like the Sun in its tepid glow,  
forsaking us much too soon  
on this shortest day of the year.

So I'll make you Darjeeling,  
my darling,  
suddenly *clasp* your hand  
into mine –

for gauging a glove size, I'll say,  
*feigning* I've shopping to do,  
the warmth of tea and touch  
creating such a beautiful lie.

## The Astronomer

Even on the eve of June  
you're early,  
your telescope set by six o'clock  
to *scan* the roofless sphere,  
as you used to do with your child  
before the day she succumbed  
to sickness,  
*before* her locks of hair fell out  
and your lulling-to-slumber stories  
were heard by eager, itching ears.

She'd said from the hospital bed  
her ghost would guide you  
to discover –  
stars and worlds  
not seen by a sea  
of billions and billions  
of eyes,

when the hues of tranquil sky  
have come to lose  
their sun-birther blue,

become  
the midnight black  
that's needed for light  
to speak from afar.

## Our Song, Many Years Later

The ballad we once danced to,  
with its backdrop strings  
straining for prominence,  
the sombre piano forefront  
and the male & female singers  
championing *forever, devoted,*  
*hold you tight*, is now just a blare  
from the kitchenette radio,  
the one that sits to accompany  
your fuming potato peeling,  
sullen stirring of stew,  
my reading of stocks and bonds  
and another procrastination  
(on a promise to help you today).

Your feet shuffle to the fridge  
and I note the murmur they make  
as your heels scrape the floor  
in running shoes –  
not unlike the pair you wore  
when music wasn't noise  
and the only bonds I thought of  
held us ever-so-close together.

## Amy's Convocation

There's a dress shoe in the corner  
of your photograph,  
on the bottom right,  
about to enter the scene –  
the scene of *you*  
in a cap and gown,  
clutching roses wilting slightly  
at their tips,  
smiling expectantly to the camera,  
in one of those staged, plastic moments  
where you're directed  
and sternly prompted  
and that you wish were more authentic.

But the shoe, it's a man's shoe,  
headed somewhere I wouldn't know  
except it's not supposed to be here,  
in this family's keepsake portrait,  
set in awkward motion  
against the stillness  
of composure,

the exposure  
of graduation  
coming faster than it used to,

with our smartphone eyes  
and digital selves  
that flash worldwide  
in seconds.

Your blonde, tumbling curls  
rest loosely on your shoulders,  
limp from humidity  
with the breeze too abated  
to lift.

An expansive shrub guards you  
against the sun and scorching heat  
instinctively drawn  
to nylon black.

But about the shoe, it's chestnut brown  
and polished,  
with its lace drawn good and tight,  
*preventing* a bumbling trip  
that if timed to the moment of clicking,  
could bring *identity* to this subtle intruder –  
his clothing, limbs  
and unwanted face  
*crashing* to the grass of ground:

spontaneous, unrehearsed,  
forever *locked* in his clumsy fall.

## **“google it”**

When you asked me for  
the best Italian bistro  
in this city, I answered  
*google it.*

That day on the beach,  
as you peered into the  
murk of knee-deep  
water, you asked me if it  
was safe to swim in,  
and I responded *google*  
*it.*

Dalini's had a slew of  
great reviews—its ambience,  
its al dente and  
pinot noir, its well-earned  
Michelin stars;

while the lake  
had tested positive  
for bacteria, the kind  
that makes you sick,  
and I was relieved to  
stop our plunge  
in a matter of moments,

singing the praise  
of the county's  
daily testing  
regimen.

I reply to your  
every question  
with *google it*.  
There is nearly nothing  
that the search  
cannot answer—  
and yes, I imagine  
you think me *lazy*,  
*terse*, that my lexicon  
is void  
of romantic words.

But when you ask me  
if I love you  
I say *google*  
the centipede,  
how it never  
runs out of  
legs,



*google* the single  
polar bear on ice,  
*never* bearing  
to leave it  
until the final  
floe has melted,

and please *google* the man  
in Uzbekistan,  
becoming a widower  
at 21,

never remarried,  
never missed a daily  
graveside visit,  
and when he turned  
one hundred and one,  
worried the world  
would run out of flowers  
before his final, doleful  
kiss upon her name.

## Hippies

*We evolved*, we like to state,  
since the days we fell from highs,

fled our bareness  
and our beads,

sat at home  
instead of marching,  
pumped our cars  
with fossil fuels,

became  
the 9-to-5-ers  
we'd disdainfully despised,

never *glancing* at the homeless  
that we claim we never see,  
the *ones* who always  
make us feel discomfort,  
while lounging on our sofas,  
while the world's  
about to blast to smithereens;

and the more things remain  
the same, the more we say  
we changed them.

## The Fall

I sigh at the sight  
of the moth I find so lifeless  
in the garden,  
rarely noting  
its beating white  
in the days or weeks gone past,

and my friend who'd passed away,  
from a toxic mix, concocted,  
said the reason why  
he longed for death  
was to grasp the love  
he'd missed while still a-breath,

that after you have died,  
others speak well of you,  
spill eulogies of praise,  
cry that you'll be missed,  
say your poems were *beautiful*,  
your paintings, *works of art*,

that all the things you'd ever done  
are now *immortalized*,  
once ignored, *beatified*,

that he didn't want to take his life  
*because* he loathed the sun,  
its warmth upon his face  
or the birdsong of the dawn,

but in the *hope*  
he'd somehow feel  
the intangible touch  
of love,

its too-little, too-late  
arrival,  
its better-than-never embrace,

its invisible kiss that's heard  
when someone weeps  
at the foot of your grave.

## The Gleaning

Not the flowers  
at their peak,  
petals ripe  
with colour,  
standing taut  
and proud and tall,  
but the withered,  
the stooped-over,  
the faded and the frayed,  
the ones about-to-die,  
from these  
I take and give you,  
plucked  
and propped by hand,  
one now spotted  
and gnarled,  
so that *love* be said  
by the no-longer-lovely,  
by the beautiful  
never again.

## Apocrypha

Write a love psalm to the Goddess,  
and watch how fast they damn you.  
Say God's not bound to gender,  
and *anathema* will be  
your name.  
Say our blood  
shares the warmth  
of the shrew's,  
that foxes, elephants, weep,  
that a chimp  
isn't guessing  
when it's right,  
and to outer darkness  
you're cast.

Tell them that a Book  
is only a book,  
that saying so  
doesn't belittle  
its worth,  
that truth is fluid,  
ever-moving,  
never carved  
on slabs of stone.  
They'll bar you  
from gates of pearls,  
assign them a flaming  
seraph.

Now, in a whisper,  
tell the woman you adore  
she's more beautiful  
than the angels;  
that the path of dirt  
you walked on, together,  
far better than roads of gold.  
That if she'll spend  
a starry night  
in your waiting-to-embrace-her  
arms,  
she may even love you back.  
She may even let you kiss her.  
She may even lie on the bed,  
in eternal, restful pose,  
allowing you to paint her,  
or better still, to write a poem of her,  
and of you and your misplaced gods;

and she might also watch and laugh  
as you fold it in an envelope,  
for mailing to a  
publisher,  
one who surely knows  
to never print such dross  
and drivel;

and she'll hope you come to your  
senses, take it *out*  
before it's stamped,

and turn it into a plane  
you can sail  
on a summer's day,

a wind from the west  
to whisk it on a journey  
more pleasant, meaningful,  
less stressful for your mind,

never having to worry  
where it lands.



## Verses

Poor poetry,  
jeered and ridiculed,  
*discarded* to bins  
half-priced,  
banished  
to basement boxes,  
more paper  
than lines of ink.

Yet I will never abandon you:  
still endeared to me  
for your rhymes,  
your single line  
that sears:

the chosen, road less traveled,

less read and far less honoured  
than our ghost-wrought  
starlet novels,  
our fibbing  
celebrity bios,  
our how-to  
do-it-yourselfs,  
our books with many pictures.

On dust-rich shelves  
you sit, neglected,  
the plump girl  
at the dance,  
watching others be held  
and heard ...

but *when* you rise  
to speak,  
in those instants  
the world, yes, listens,  
it's something more remembered  
than what's currently number 1:

a comparison  
to summer's  
day,

from failing hands,  
a torch,

a set of shoreline  
footprints  
and the wonder  
that we're carried.

## Fidelity

*This is the fluid in which we meet each other,  
This haloey radiance that seems to breathe  
And lets our shadows wither  
Only to blow  
Them huge again, violent giants on the wall.  
One match scratch makes you real.*

– Sylvia Plath, “By Candlelight”

Our shadows, faithful followers,  
super glued to our  
forms –  
ever-loyal,

whether we’re good  
or whether we’re not,

and there –  
if the right  
kind of light  
will allow –  
in our lovemaking,  
our murders,  
our scaling of mountains  
and stairs,

and here, leaping  
off a trestle,  
when all's become too much –

see one dive  
towards the river,  
disappearing  
in water's crest,  
engulfed below the  
ripples,  
in darkness  
where flame is lost.

## **Unborn Daughter**

I fear for you and what's ahead:

Wars of race and creed,  
cities bombed and shelled,  
skeletons of bone and stone  
and fresh water dried to sand,  
radiation in the land

and even if there's not,  
if it doesn't come to pass,  
how can I let you out of doors  
with the bad man there  
and waiting?

## Omnipotence

*I, more stolidly, tend to suspect that God  
is a novelist — a garrulous and deeply  
unwholesome one too.*

– Martin Amis

As a novelist, you say,  
you have the powers  
of a god,  
the death and life  
of characters  
in your potent, scribing hand –

deciding who is loved  
and who survives,

who is buried  
or burnt to ash,

strewn into the Ganges,  
perhaps,

or left to rest  
in a marble urn  
over a family's  
fireplace.

Piddling details  
aside,  
let's promote the *poet*  
to the omnipotent Lord of yore,  
a God unmatched by others,

mould the *world*  
to what it really should have been  
(from the start of *Genesis*),

when the Spirit hovered  
over the waters' face;

make a *Pangaea*  
that never splits,  
do away with all division,

trim the *claws* of carnivores,  
let the lions chew the grapes  
of flowered fields,

and if that's asking way too much,  
at least allow your hero  
the saving *kiss* of his beloved –

do not let him  
drink himself  
to a shrivelled, pitied state,

nor *allow* his neck  
to fit into  
your frayed and knotted noose;

show the mercy you believe  
you never got,  
show the dead  
and deities  
how it could have been much better  
(if only *you*  
had been in charge),

and do not await a Messiah's  
return  
to get the work that's needed  
done –

do it now  
and do it quickly,

in the loving,  
triune lines  
of your haiku.



## Coda

I dedicate the poems I'll never write  
to you and to us,  
tiring, perhaps, of coming up  
with original ways to say *love*,  
of finding a miracle in the humdrum,  
of finding a thesaurus that does the trick.

So as for that dishevelled old man  
I pass by on the sidewalk,  
he'll remain *anonymous* and his shuffling  
stay un-scribed –  
I will not imagine him as a sturdy young lad  
whose heart was cruelly splintered  
at a high-school dance;

and the verses on the abandoned house  
with its peeling paint  
and missing-a-few-planks  
veranda –  
I won't picture the children  
who may have raced  
throughout its corridors  
or the daughter whose father caught her  
with her teenaged beau  
on the backyard swing,  
or the tree branch on which it was fastened,

how the birds helped the mother to get up  
in the morning instead of wishing  
she hadn't married or even that she were  
dead;

and the one about the loons  
who sleep standing up,  
their faces buried in their wings,  
how uncomfortable that looks to me  
and if I'd ever trade the warmth of a bed  
for a single chance to fly.

## Japanese Robot

Dr. Zimmer's acquisition  
caused his colleagues  
to stop and wonder:

a single man, never wed,  
never telling tales of  
love and sex,  
and now, living with this  
curvy, comely being  
made of wires in lieu of veins,  
simulated layer of skin,  
synthetic stream of hair.

*Sue-Lin, her name, she has a name*  
he'd say, always emphasizing  
*she*, never *it*,

and when we came to visit,  
she was seated at the table,  
greeting us with a blink,  
a nod and a gracious smile;

and yes, he still did all the cleaning,  
and yes, he spoke so very gently,  
complimenting her,

even singing *happy birthday*  
when we all sat down for cake  
(which we never saw her eat);

and yes, hers was a separate bed,  
in a separate room, and he always knocked  
first, he told us, never touched her  
without consent,

wrote some verse for her  
in English,  
awaiting her translation,  
marvel she'd uncover  
all his metaphors for love:

*She was never really programmed  
for either poetry or passion.*

## **Preservation**

You've stopped  
coming over of late,  
sensing I've crossed  
some sort of line,  
saying you want to preserve  
our friendship,  
this affection of another kind  
we can't describe,  
our sibling-like rapport,  
this anything-but-fall-in-love  
that's protected just one of us,  
the other silently smitten,  
burning when our touch  
is accidental.

## Flapjacks

I overcooked the pancakes.  
No matter how much syrup  
we pour, they're way past  
edible.

We can use them in the yard,  
toss them as a Frisbee,  
have the *dog* set out in chase.

Even our retriever  
will have to wonder  
how we can eat such a horrid thing,  
so black and coarse in the mouth,  
never knowing how they're really  
supposed to taste,  
or how *fluffed* they would have been  
had you took your rightful place  
behind the stove;

instead of rummaging  
through closets,  
looking for games to play,  
in the hours before our lunch  
when we feign we have no problems.

## **A Place Beneath the Water**

We drive to the beach  
the day you're released  
from the hospital,  
the pills afloat in your glass  
currently a memory  
taken by tides;

and I suggest a brief, brisk swim  
in cleansing waves,  
to wash the stress  
from your battered mind,  
and you strip-down rather hastily,  
splash about as a child might,  
as you did when you were a girl,

and I lose sight of you  
in a panic of thirty seconds,  
as you submerge your head  
and hold your breath  
for a protracted half-a-minute,  
attempting to touch  
that part of yourself  
where the air cannot reach  
nor light tell the world  
what you've hid.

## **Anthem**

The path to peace it's said  
is found in sacred books of old,  
on parchment, scrolls and ink;  
in a choir's hallelujah,  
ringing bells and fervent prayer.

Let's scribe our wishful reveries,  
our old prophetic songs,  
say the bomb will never fall;  
that police will join the protest  
and the judge will grant a pardon  
to the Indigenous kid in chains.

For it's not that hard to add a verse  
and paint a pretty picture:

Governments disband,  
there's no more need to demonstrate,  
and prison gates swing open,  
those who leave bear violets,  
while violence drops as dust.

Faith begets trust,  
trust begets love,  
and the one who was your enemy  
brings you candy in the night,  
saying all is calm in Jerusalem,  
and flags are neither waved nor burned.



## Love Seat in the Snow

On a snow bank hugging a street  
I saw it leaning,  
threatening to *fall*  
in oncoming  
traffic.

It seemed in mint condition,  
albeit damp  
from the elements:

the vermillion hadn't faded  
and the fabric wasn't worn;

I couldn't see  
a patch or tear –

it wasn't *stained*  
by Cabernet.

I surmised the couple  
this belonged to  
had a major falling-out,  
that doors were slammed repeatedly  
and a suitcase had been packed  
until it burst,

that in the *dead*  
of winter's night  
it awaited the rumble  
of garbage trucks.

But then, perhaps it *wasn't* discarded,  
that this pair have so much warmth  
that brims between them,  
they sit in comfort  
amid the scream of gales  
and flurries,

waving gaily to passers-by  
between their kisses.

## From the Tomb of Departed Words

If I'd written my verse  
with quills,  
in a century  
long since passed,  
when archaic  
words were fresh,  
would my *bombaze*  
style *bewilder*?

If I'd begun  
as a mere *haspat*,  
a naive, *teenaged* lad,

describing the *cank* I heard,  
along the bustling, market  
square, the *talk*  
of many townsfolk,  
would irony  
undoubtedly abound  
within my scrolls?

Would I fear  
becoming *popular*:  
a *common, vulgar* fellow,  
strive instead for *special*,  
*extraordinary*:  
a *tirant*, yes, indeed?

And as I aged,  
would my *caution*  
be scribed as *charely*  
as I carried a candle  
through black?

Would I decry  
all the *killing*  
in Europe, grieve  
for the ones  
who were *qualed*?

Would I lament  
the loss  
of my *moppet*,  
the *daughter*  
struck down  
by the plague?

And in seeking  
a *gentle* God –  
and an even *gentler*  
woman – would *boneryte*  
still be worthy  
of the poets,

yes the ones both *quick*  
and dead?

## **Today I Turned 50**

Fifty is halfway there,  
to one-hundred.  
It's half a century,  
five full decades and the epitome  
of "middle age."

But I don't want to be a centenarian,  
be a triple-digit number  
and have more experiences  
being old and sick  
than young and spry.

The shorter lifespans were better,  
not the 30-somethings of the Middle Ages  
where disease was around the corner  
and you had to marry when you were a teen,  
but the 74s and 75s of the 1950s,  
when the aged knew what was golden,  
didn't take their years for granted,  
and three-quarters 'round the bend  
was more than enough of a ride.

### Third Trimester

The Beatles are on Sullivan  
and I'm about to be born.  
There is no correlation  
other than my mother  
is watching them on television,

and though my eyes are developed  
by now, they're closed inside her womb  
but I swear I'm hearing something  
with these new ears of mine  
that I've never heard before  
(not only this thing called "music"  
but the frenzied screams  
of American girls);

and yes, once I've entered the world,  
the melodies meant for me  
will be simple and patronizing,  
designed to soothe,  
make me slumber,  
and I'll wail, scrunch my face  
instead, demanding, in my own  
wordless way, that the mobile  
above me start to chime  
*She Loves You Yeah Yeah Yeah.*

### Coda III

That page at the end of my notebook,  
the one that is blank,  
is the best poem of mine you've ever read,  
you say to me as I choose which to keep,  
which to toss and pretend I never wrote.

*I went through it  
when you were away, you reveal  
in a tone bereft of innocence,  
like a boy boasting to his friends  
that he managed to swig some vodka  
when his parents were in the basement,  
perhaps sorting through laundry  
or checking on the furnace  
or doing something that required him  
to be cunning and to seize the moment  
like a vulture that dives to the ground  
while the corpse is still warm enough  
to pass for something living.*

*Your metaphors are silly, you say bluntly,  
your analogies make me laugh –  
those of scavenger, Russian drink,  
mischievous youth.*

*Take the last sheet in your book,  
the one without any writing:  
it made more sense than anything else  
you've rambled on about.*

I reply that you are right,  
that pallid vacancy and lines of blue  
have more to say than verbosity,  
that I should just write "white"  
instead of "pallid,"  
that I misread my spiny thesaurus,  
that what is simplest  
is most complex  
and lives in a realm  
no words can elucidate  
or yield direction to;

that it's a sign of literary innovation  
to have an entire volume  
of nothing but lined paper,  
that the next time I buy a notebook  
I'm best off to merely scrawl my name  
upon its cover  
and wait for the accolades to pour in  
from those who know the work of a genius  
when they see it.



## White Wigs

In the 18<sup>th</sup>-century,  
men who could afford them  
wore white wigs.  
Presidents and noblemen,  
shopkeepers and servants,  
Baroque musicians playing sonatas  
for an audience, the males applauding  
all crowned in white wigs.

I pity the ones with glorious red curls,  
blonde flowing manes  
and those who were thirty and yet to grey,  
all forced by social norms to don the look  
of the worn and the aged,  
no one knowing if they might be bald,  
had dandruff, or were hiding some other  
follicle disaster,

maybe one of them having a chance encounter  
with a beautiful woman,  
her slender, supple fingers  
fondling his fake and lengthy hair  
and he would never know how it felt.

## Miracle

Tonight I will ask you to marry me.  
You will surely say I am mad,  
in the British sense of the word,  
and then laugh off my promise to love  
and commit as I-must-have-stopped-over-  
at-the-pub-and-had-a-few-too-many  
before our coffee date on this insignificant  
middle-of-the-week kind of evening.

But this day is anything but ordinary:  
Look at my hands, they are stained  
from painting my kitchen the colour  
that is your favourite  
even though my eyesight is failing,  
and I'm convinced that both our God  
and the birds have given us their blessing  
as shoots sprouted in my garden overnight  
from seeds dropped from above  
and the weather person on TV  
said there'd be no rain  
for the next seven Saturdays to come.

## **Andante in H**

*– for Carrie*

Each note I play on the piano is for you  
I say, in my adoration, the real ones  
and the ones that I've made up,  
and I really can't play the piano  
as well as I pretend I can,  
but the songs I string together,  
impromptu, spontaneous as they may be,  
are nonetheless love songs,  
ones that Brahms and Debussy  
could have conjured  
had they not been so obsessed  
with trite details like composition  
and wondering if the cellist and pianist  
could really play their instruments  
or were merely faking it  
amid the frantic waves of a baton  
and the gasps from a startled audience  
who'd heard nothing like this before.

## Sounds from an Open Window

In the calm of dewless dawn,  
with the overlap of dark  
and August light,  
the cicadas, crickets,  
competing with the swallows  
in the art of song and calling.

I look *over* to the bed  
where you're sleeping rather soundly,  
knowing soon that only the warbler  
will remain,  
the insects taking a breather  
till the dusk makes its return.

I want to conjure a summons  
with my voice,  
with sounds that can't be wrought  
in words and poems,

from a gentle *paramour*,  
ever so frail, so human.

## **Believe**

*– for Carrie*

They no longer believe  
that I will lay it down,  
that I'll cease to write these poems  
and they are right.

I never said  
I wouldn't draft a verse,  
a stanza on my love for you  
and for Summer's  
flowering shrubs  
along the pond.

But I'll keep it hid,  
and far between and few  
it will emerge,  
and just between  
the three of us:

You, my honey love,  
myself, ever seeking to find,  
and that which is someday found,  
on earth as it is in heaven.

## Interlopers

I cannot be sure that the birds  
and the squirrels – let alone the big racoon  
that climbs down from the belatedly budding  
tree – are the same characters  
who I used to see then didn't  
through months of frozen landscape  
when, I imagine, the mammals  
were in some sort of hibernating state  
or at least taking it rather easily  
in their primitive burrows while the birds  
were in Florida sunning themselves  
and drinking premium water from a fountain.

I feel they'd be offended  
if I said "welcome back" –  
that they'd believe I think they all look alike,  
that they might be here for the very first time  
and I've mistaken them for last year's gang,  
that the food I'm leaving  
as a token of friendship  
wouldn't be their first choice on the menu,  
that a would-be friend wouldn't assume  
they're all the same  
and that they could easily pick me out  
of a crowd of 100,000 people  
within a second of doubtless wonder.

## Ryan Gosling

When you mentioned  
how hot you thought Ryan Gosling  
was, it wasn't to make me jealous  
or envious of his looks  
(though of course life would be easier  
if I had them),

it was to display your belief  
in the rule of exceptions,  
that *he* would be able to take you out  
of your aura of celibacy,  
your prudish disdain of sexy talk,  
your vow to read *Anna Karenina*  
from cover to cover,  
of never caressing yourself in a stimulating  
way or leaping in front of a speeding train  
you once said you'd do as a joke.

## Reflection

In the mirror, my face is “backwards.”  
The only image that I behold, of me,  
is inverted.  
What’s left is right  
and what’s right is wrong.

Everyone else sees what’s really there:  
the moles, the creases,  
the straying strands of hair  
where they surely ought to be.

Yes, I can see the accuracy  
in a photo,  
but I want the view of my true countenance  
from *your* authentic eyes,  
my frown rising, dropping  
like the east-to-west path of sun.

Of course, you have the very same problem,  
this fallacy of glass,  
the swallowed myth  
that *mirrors never lie*.  
I’ve merely stated what the issue is  
and await some puzzled look on your face  
that only I will ever see.



## The Fence

On the other side of the fence,  
the neighbour's grass is lush  
and weedless. I see him kissing  
his stunning wife, tenderly,  
without hesitation.

On the other side of the fence,  
I see the public school  
where children tumble,  
laugh, dust themselves off.  
Recess comes twice daily,  
and at lunch the shouts  
are louder.

On the other side of the fence,  
I see the skyline miles away;  
clear glass towers  
holding clouds  
but for a moment,  
the ones that sail through sunlit blue  
and I think I see a window-washer  
dangling  
like some *Spider-Man* –  
with binoculars I make him out

and though I'd never do that job myself,  
I imagine the pulse of life  
around him  
five-hundred feet mid-air,  
his beaming face  
bouncing back at him  
from the translucent, 38<sup>th</sup> floor.

The fence  
in my backyard  
is far too high.  
I'd like to see much more,  
see what lies  
beyond the pillars  
of banks and monoliths,

the foothills in the distance  
which rise and drop,  
like breasts that lift and fall  
in heated breath,  
like those of my neighbour's wife,  
who sunbathes  
while he's away,

a *hey there* look that's thwarted  
by the noble tenth commandment  
and six feet of cottonwood.

## **Panthera Leo**

*That heavenly bliss, where is its promise?*

I looked for lambs that lay with lions  
just to see one in the jaws of a King.

I will shear its royal mane while it is sleeping,  
paste it as a beard  
onto the face of an heir apparent,  
one of my own biased choosing –

and I will say that peace has come,  
that there's no more room  
for melancholy,  
anthemic songs of death.

Hear it, the roar of a dolphin  
in waves;

and see it, amid the bramble  
of your own backyard,  
a mourning dove  
gone gold, majestic,  
ruler of an aberrant Earth.

## **Stereotypes**

I have to confess.

I haven't worn  
the kimono  
that you bought me  
for my birthday.

It isn't  
that it's hideous,  
with its pitter-patter prints  
of leopard paws,  
or I'd be embarrassed  
to be seen  
in its flow  
of purple silk –

or perhaps it's true I would,  
but only because  
I believe  
in authenticity –  
not appropriation;

that I've never set my foot  
in Yokohama,  
Tokyo,  
or any other portion of Japan;

that I abhor the thought of sushi  
which is not to say  
that all the Japanese  
are fond of it,  
eat with wooden chopsticks  
(which I've never been able  
to master),  
and that a single grain of rice  
is never spilled,  
as if the starch  
was somehow  
magnetic  
and the utensils  
simply conducive  
to the attraction  
of innate law;

that they all believe  
in Zen,  
bow to ancestral  
shrines,  
smoke and incense  
wafting through each room;

that Godzilla  
haunts their dreams  
and they'd flip me  
in a second  
since they all know martial arts.

No, I'm sorry,  
but the kimono  
that you got me  
*doesn't fit,*  
is like a dress that holds  
2 people,  
makes me trip  
when I'm on the run,  
gets tangled  
in my spokes  
when I'm on  
my bicycle,

pedalling frantically,

pretending I'm chased  
by a giant lizard  
stomping cardboard houses  
underfoot.

## Osmosis

The way our cat  
sleeps on books  
makes us think of *osmosis*,

her head reposed  
on the cover's title,  
her paw outstretched  
over the author's name  
denoting some kind of kinship,  
as though the writer  
forged a portal  
for lazy felines  
to stealthily enter.

I've heard that whiskers  
help a cat to navigate  
the dark,  
are conductors that channel  
information to its brain  
in a manner much quicker  
than the antiquated roundabouts  
of a podium-chained professor.

Let's wake our dearest pet  
upon sufficient assimilation,  
see if she spouts some Shakespeare  
as none other than Shylock could –

or replace *The Merchant of Venice*  
with a treatise of greater use  
than a reprisal's pound of flesh,  
done in a hush that doesn't disturb,

propping *A Brief History of Time*  
beneath her chin  
and await the meows  
that otherwise beckon us  
to feed, to stroke,  
to clean her kitty  
litter,  
that speak instead  
of cosmological aeons,  
the pull of black holes,  
the deep red shift in stars  
much too far for us to see.



## Marooning the Muse

We sat at the beach *together*  
but I didn't write a thing.  
I looked to the horizon  
and its meeting of sky and sea  
and the cerulean they both shared  
at the point where we see  
the world is round indeed.

You wrote of sandpipers  
on the strand and the seagulls  
encircling the trawler  
traversing the harbour,

and I left you the metaphors  
to find while I was lost in a reverie  
that had Magellan meeting  
Eratosthenes  
on the edge of a precipice,  
saying yes, it's all an illusion,  
this vortex of birds and their fish,  
this looping of ships and our poems.

## The West Coast of Somewhere

As a boy, I saw only sand and sea  
and stones I pitched with a splash  
beneath the shifting animal clouds  
that I envisioned.

As a single young man  
on a day of sun and cirrus,  
I knew nothing of rocks  
and waves colliding with the shore,  
only the flash of skin and curves  
exposed for browning.

Now middle-aged in wedlock,  
ambling along the beach  
beside my wife,  
I see the patterns on pebbles  
and the gulls that dip for trout  
while the crew of college girls,  
jumping for *frisbees* in the surf,  
are supposedly a blur below  
this cumulus of savannah cats  
overseeing their great,  
ephemeral kingdom.

## Hawaii

The summer gusts  
are making Lake Huron  
look like the ocean –  
and I envision for a moment  
surfers roaring to shore  
at Waikiki  
and this landscape littered  
with high-rise condos,  
beachfront Hiltons  
where the conifers are  
and the skateboard kid  
a gofer  
for the drug runner  
up in the penthouse.

There's little sand to spare  
when tourists congregate  
by the thousands and  
thousands of miles away  
from that fantasy  
I'm suddenly grateful  
for this water's low salinity,

that it's free of sharks  
and jellyfish stings,

that the jetlagged couple  
who'd stomp on my towel  
aren't here, too rude  
to say they are sorry.

## **Après Renovation**

From inside the louvre door  
I inhale the lily-of-the-valley  
bestowed in aromatic wafts,

I can hear the fleeting patter  
of rain from cauliflower  
clouds brimming coal-  
blotch grey,  
the red-breasted nuthatch  
exclaiming it's coming home  
with limp worm supreme

and that there will indeed  
be a sunset after dinner  
from its vantage above  
this portal of privacy slits,

this giver of air and of sound,  
taker of water and light,

which only the grieving  
and sometimes the blind  
accept as worthy sacrifice.

## Astronaut

The child still in me  
imagines the *what-will-I-be-*  
*when-I-grow-up*  
becoming true:  
gaping out of a space station  
window, gawking below  
at a world tilted drunk,  
lovers looking up at a faint fuzz  
of light, thinking I'm a falling star  
on which to offer wishes,  
granted or otherwise,  
my own but to never plunge back  
into the sea, believing  
the lack of oxygen a lie,  
that I can breathe like the moon  
and illuminate the darkest of all skies.

## Flower Children

It's hard to believe that crotchety old man  
and his wife hobbling into the store  
where I work were once hippies.  
Their faces creased like a shirt  
I forgot to put in the dryer  
and had no time to iron, the man's pants  
pulled up to his chest and his wife muttering  
something about the pie she has to bake  
for the Sunday church social.

I try to picture them at Woodstock,  
a farmer's soggy field overrun  
by painted young ladies  
showing their bouncing, naked breasts  
at a time of dawning liberation,  
the man then bearded without the faintest  
hint of grey and both of them smoking pot  
and waiting for Jefferson Airplane  
to hit the stage.

I can't imagine them  
listening to acid rock  
or Led Zeppelin's vinyl debut  
with its flaming Hindenburg crashing  
to a hellish death in New Jersey.

I can't see the man swapping his  
Arnold Palmer polo shirt  
for a psychedelic tie-dye  
and the woman with her midriff  
bare and smooth, a peace sign  
above her navel.

They ask if they can pay by cheque,  
that they've never sent an email  
when I suggest our online specials,  
that they've yet to see our Facebook page  
and that Instagram is something  
they never would have imagined  
when they rolled in the mud over  
half a century ago, dancing  
as if they would never age a day.



## Innocence

When I was a child,  
I said that meat was grown  
in fields, amid the rows  
of blondish grain, though I knew  
that wasn't true.

They can nurture  
it now in labs,  
I've heard,  
making *prophetic*  
my naïveté.

But back then,  
my Christ was  
somewhat kinder:  
all had enough to eat,  
on that holy, grassy knoll,  
and twelve baskets  
were brought back up—  
*loaves* only, not a martyred  
fish in sight.

If you looked between the clouds  
you would see them,  
as if that too were sea  
and you could travel anywhere  
and breathe.

## **Water as Sky**

This pond is teeming  
with tadpoles,  
tiny fish soon amphibious,

and we question which is better,  
to breathe in both the air  
and in the water,

or to remain below the sheen  
of a translucent  
surface,  
unable to take in the breeze  
that carries the clamour of words  
and of wars.

## Church Bells

The steeple bell  
from the Anglican church  
chimes every 15 minutes,  
doing a double at the bottom  
of the hour, and nothing short  
of a concerto at the top.

I check my watch  
and it's 2 minutes ahead  
of what I hear,  
on par with my smartphone  
and the shortwave station  
that's purportedly set  
to an atomic clock.

They say on WWV  
that it's accurate  
to within a nanosecond  
every 3 or so million years,  
though I doubt  
the Australopithecines  
who must have got it going  
could have foretold the competition  
from Rolex, Samsung, and the Rector's  
reliable ringing  
just a block-and-a-half away;

that these simple-minded crosses  
of ape and men  
could have envisioned accuracy  
above that of God,  
that His House of Worship  
is 120 ticks behind the times,  
that I haven't a clue what to do  
with that brief but priceless allotment  
that the good Lord, if He is right,  
has given me.

## Tally Marks

I etched *seven*,  
not as 7 or even  
VII,  
but as + + + | | ,  
a whole week's  
worth of vagueness,  
waiving the classic  
ease of Arabic,  
the Roman's  
pillared grandeur;

and you rightly assumed  
that I was counting down  
to *something*, ticking days  
until what's *better*  
eventually came,  
my number again  
*numerical*,  
concurrently revered  
and wicked:

a triumphant role of dice,  
or the *scratch*  
of infidelity,

a septet of iniquities  
grievous,

primeval *marvels*  
of our globe.

Always complete;  
sometimes lucky.

## Le Fait Accompli

*I didn't know  
that black and brown  
could look so grand* you said,  
in the painting's critique,  
a pair of squares  
side-by-side  
with cream its neutral setting.

I followed the  
pattern  
of your gaze  
and the path  
your stare was plodding –  
seeing *nothing* grand,  
nothing outside of *bland*,  
with *pedestrian*  
two steps up.

*Together, they're a rectangle,  
as if you'd made a breakthrough,  
discovered the cure  
for cancer.  
Two sides the same,  
two are different.*

I wondered  
if you spoke of squares  
or the art  
of mediocrity;  
an artist's vapid state  
or ourselves as rigid shapes:

dried,  
on canvas snared.



## The City

The city you say we hate  
has grown on me now  
and I feel no enmity with it.

And I walked today,  
through the city you say we hate.  
I stepped in snow  
and slipped on ice  
but I didn't really fall –  
a railing there to rescue.

It was cold today, in the city  
you say we hate,  
and the homeless sat  
on sewer grates  
and felt the heat blow up.  
I thought it ranked of methane  
but there wasn't an explosion.

I was accosted,  
in the city you say we hate,  
by a man panning for coins.  
*No change, no change, no English,*  
*no change,* I shook my head at first,  
then turned and flung two quarters at him –  
from the both of us,  
though I knew you'd disavow.

A fire truck roared past me  
in the city you say we hate.  
Its sirens screamed like murder  
but then that would have been the police  
and there were none at all in sight.

A house must be aflame,  
in the city you say we hate.  
I hope right now it's vacant,  
with a mother and child away,  
shopping, or on a visit to a friend.

If it's you who've befriended,  
tell them not to worry,  
that there's a hydrant  
on the corner where they live;  
that all will be rebuilt  
by kindly neighbours and their kin;  
that they needn't feel embittered,  
blame the gridlock, shunting trains.

Tell them, while you too  
have time to love,  
a little.

## Forza Italia

I was always an A+ student in geography –  
really, I was. Knowing all our provincial capitals  
by rote, filling in the blanks  
of fifty wordless states  
and coming up with the quickest route  
from New Delhi to Beijing  
on a globe without any boundaries.

But I thought Tuscany was in France –  
not the home of Florentine.  
There's no excuse for this blunder  
though I could easily blame  
the Pinot Noir,  
its fragrant burn, hint of berries,  
and the fishnet-stockinged waitress  
who had sung its praise to me  
in a Monte Carlo accent

but then I'd be guilty  
of forgetting the freedom  
of that smallest of nations  
that took Grace Kelly away,  
left me thinking the Riviera  
was little more than bikinis and baguettes  
and the *bordel de merde!* of the painter  
specking sand upon his canvas  
by the shore.

## Chelsea and Liverpool

I asked where you were going  
and you replied

*I need to be out in the world*

*to write about the world*

and I thought to follow you  
but checked myself in time.

I've no right to pry and spy  
at what you see –  
bring a coloured notebook with you  
and jot down what you feel –

I'll be at home, on the couch,  
watching English Football  
and eating pickles from the jar.

And we'll hear it *all* –  
the curses, the cheers,  
the upheaval of the crowds  
and their disenchantment,  
and you'll nail the winning header  
just before the final whistle,  
the man on the corner  
shooting heroin,  
causing you to gasp,  
the punctured veins  
that keep things from being  
forgotten, tied at nil.

## Just another coup d'état

When he opened the account  
we called him *Jonas*,  
cheques and balances  
as gold cuff links  
without a scratch.

The business thrived:  
he hired and fired  
without conscience or remorse  
and the ties that bind  
were locked  
in stocks and bonds.

We gasped and called him *Daniel*  
when he gave it all away,  
save the dollar that he placed  
in a child's  
outstretched hand,  
saying, *invest as seeds*  
*in those who thirst*  
*and hunger,*  
*one fine day*  
*they'll bless you*  
*with a poem*  
*expressed as thanks.*

It made no sense:  
the words, the deeds,  
why he lives in cold damp hostels  
and gives his kisses to the poor.

Perhaps he saw a vision  
of his death,  
amid the mansions  
and the yachts,  
the loneliness  
of beachfront homes  
when there's no one to see  
the sunset with.

Or maybe Wall Street lions  
took the life of someone dear  
and he *seized* a second chance  
to get it right, to make amends,  
to pet the heads of puppies  
he once shook his briefcase at.

## Curbside Café

I thought she watched me  
as I wrote,  
a girl with beret cliché,  
Irish cream and lemon Danish,  
who'd smoke a cigarette  
if legal  
but it's not;

and she's reading Schulz  
and Robert Frost  
and the many roads to heaven  
and I thought to ask her what she thought  
of love and death and living  
amid our own sel-  
fish carte blanche.

She wasn't there, really,  
nor am I – we weave and thread  
and move about  
as atoms from the sun,  
that settled here so predisposed  
to birth and fear and loathing.

I see her sometimes, singing praise  
when the moon  
is halved

and if the evening tide  
pulls cold,  
when the waitress looks for dollar tips  
and the closing chimes  
ring sweet;

and I have no time to end the verse  
with lights that cue to leave,  
the sax that fades to hush,  
and the cop who walks the beat  
looking through  
the tinted glass,  
ideally dreaming  
of a night  
without a single  
shout or crime.



## **Mariner**

A nightmare, yes:

your seven hands,  
all clutching,  
all out of reach  
of my rusted  
iron hook.

When I was a boy,  
I dreamed of sailing seas,  
climbing masts,

whenever clouds  
amassed  
on horizons;

the sun  
cast from sight  
like the tail  
of a whale  
after breath.

## **Fog**

There's smoke  
streaming in  
off the lake,

as if it were  
ablaze,

as though  
physics were defied,  
fire and water,  
fused.

But upon  
my reaching  
the beach,  
I see serenity  
there instead,

its opacity  
puffing  
ashore,

while the distant waves  
are veiled  
by wayward cloud.

It's like I've hit  
the end of the world,

with geese and gulls  
as ghosts,

that a Christ-like walk  
on the wet  
would have me vanish  
in a cottony  
realm,

into that place  
of lore  
and myth,  
where the expired beloved  
await,  
to welcome me  
into their calm.

Yet it's not  
a miraculous thing,  
no revelation  
for revelling  
aloud –

just the gift  
of a temperate day,  
a refreshing  
sprinkle of cool,

a veering  
volatility  
of vapour,

the weaving  
of wings  
into white.

## The Porpoise

*That's  
not a dolphin,  
our niece and nephew  
complained,  
wiser-than-the-norm,  
their hands and faces  
pressed  
upon the aquarium's  
massive glass.*

That's  
when I felt sorry  
for this poorest chap,  
the porpoise:

sent to the  
ocean's  
second division  
for its blunt and rounded snout,  
its smile not as cheery  
as its beloved,  
famous cousin,

without kids  
to toss it a ball  
with which to balance  
and entertain,

few to care  
if it's caught in a net  
that's cast  
to sweep our tuna,

lacking loving liberators  
to mass upon the sands,  
newsmen  
leaving its beaching  
on the evening's  
cutting-room floor.

We decided to take the children  
on a hired boat one day,  
sat still in the calm of the bay,

waiting for dolphins  
to show,

watching for fins  
that slice the water  
always reminding us  
of the sharks,

wishing for leaps  
that announce their arrival,  
the happy grins  
that say *we're here*.

## **Maybe**

When you turned to me  
and raised your brow,  
I too made a face.

He sauntered past:  
grey, dishevelled,  
second-hand clothes  
still rank with beer and smoke.

The little girl beside him  
was clean and bright  
and smelled of soap.

Maybe he was her father  
or her granddad.

Maybe a stranger she befriended  
as he panhandled,  
in front of the candy store  
a block away.

Maybe he had a few coins to spare  
and bought her gumballs  
instead of the cigarettes  
we assumed he craved.

Maybe he was gentle  
and didn't fondle her at night  
when owls made their perch  
and roosters knew their time  
was coming.



## **Ex gratia**

The seeds  
you left for the birds,  
by his grave  
(your betrothed's),  
are still untouched  
with our leaving,  
in your throes  
of "letting go."

We stood there  
a good two hours,  
your fingers following  
the furrows  
of his etched-in-granite  
appellation,

your spirit rapt  
by the melody  
coming from trees,  
and by the reverie  
of your blissful days with  
him.

*They'll eat them  
when I'm gone, you said,  
a reference to our departing  
(or so I thought),*

with the cemetery gates  
about to close.

*I don't mean at dusk,*  
you uttered as addendum,  
during our trudge  
back to the car,  
*I mean when I lay beneath,*  
  
*beside him.*

## **Bitter Jeeze Louise**

The raincoat that she dons,  
on sunny days, makes them laugh:  
the girls in tank and halter tops,  
the boys on black skateboards,  
even grandmas walking dogs.

She spends her Spring  
in stack 9B,  
section E point six-four-three.  
She's working on a thesis,  
I've heard,  
from the driver on my route.  
How fossil fuels  
can be replaced  
by solar panels,  
westward winds.

"Louise" never smiles  
when she boards the city bus,  
her change dropped like anchors  
from her hands.

*She gave her quarters  
all to bullies, learned to study  
without lunch.*

Even now,  
she sits in corner cubicles,  
eyes graffiti scrawled of her,  
twelve years past,  
has yet to scratch it out  
or eat a sandwich,  
soup, at noon.

## **The Goat**

When we stopped  
at Sheppard's farm,  
you spotted  
the friendless goat,

unfettered,  
unfenced.

Such a darling,  
bleating creature,  
its milk to make  
our cheese.

While we wait,  
I read  
of the centre-fielder  
dropping the inning-ending  
fly.

A tinny clang  
of bell  
signals sprints  
in grass land-  
scape.

Dear discarded  
from the sheep,  
our wine  
is that much better  
and our bread  
is duly crowned.

Who would choose to blame you?  
Who would choose to blame you?

## ***Errata***

sounds so chic  
I almost yearn  
for that fatal flaw,  
on the printed page,

denoted as a footnote  
'fore the text,  
or on a photocopied  
slip that slides within.

In real life,  
there isn't such a  
lovely-on-the-tongue descript:

*Error, Mistake,  
Bone-headed Blunder;*

their speaking  
ever caustic  
from the lips,  
their hearing  
so acidic  
on the ears.

Soothe my wrongs  
with word, my dear,  
with Latin  
that is kinder;

let others know  
there's beauty  
found in failure,

in the remembrance  
of my sins.



## Bullets

On his passing's anniversary,  
you write of your soldier-brother,  
signing *up* for Bush and Blair  
and all the blood that smelled of petrol.

Like him, you set yourself alight  
with your poem on random bullets,  
their anonymity,  
how most of them miss their mark,  
lie flat in their innocence,  
or wedged in the greater distance  
where the sidewalk meets the street,  
between blocks on boulevards,  
in bricks of banks and buildings,

that only one in twenty-seven  
pierces bone, fragments flesh,  
is cursed by sons and daughters  
and the woman who becomes a widow  
the very moment that she is told,

asked if she'll identify, verify,

keep the flag that drapes a coffin,  
possess a plaque that bears a face.

## **A Week in the Life of Morgan**

On Tuesday,  
wheat stalks bowed in half  
as if bending to a god;  
a god without mercy,  
and a field of gold  
at once showed its fear.

It was hot that day  
and that's all it was.

On Wednesday,  
I said there was no god  
or gods  
and that droughts and rains  
don't depend on deity,  
but on currents  
and jet streams.

On Thursday you picked some blooms  
and made a garland  
for Saint Jackie.  
I said there was no "Jackie" saint  
and you dropped the "Jackie O."  
"Oh," I said and sighed.  
Maybe for the Kennedy years  
but wedding Aristotle  
raised too many brows.

Let's talk philosophy, shall we?

On Friday, the King of David  
brought us fish.

I thought the reference  
was biblical.

You said your friend  
delivers to Catholics  
and he runs a market stall.

Saturday, everything changed.

It didn't stop raining,  
the neighbours built an ark.

You called to cancel our session  
under the stars.

I would have proven Sagan right  
and Einstein a cosmic fraud.

Sunday we rested,  
according to the Sabbath.

The Adventists say it's Saturday  
and we know they're damn well right.

I cut the grass with scissors.  
When no one was looking.

On Monday you met me on campus.  
We read the books of Donne.

I spied your lashes  
and your eyes, a powder-blue,  
lips that curled to stanzas, commas,  
thinking you'd found me wrong,  
that Jehovah laughed last,  
that by tomorrow  
I'd confess belief,  
my sins,  
light a candle to the Christ  
and whisper prayers to Jackie O.

You said you simply found him funny,  
would look for Bukowski,  
Plath, a Ferlinghetti work  
that rhymed.

## Ashes of Books

There, another thirty feet,  
the mound of charcoal grey,  
*The Communist Manifesto*  
by Marx and Engels.  
Twenty-two copies  
bought in bulk.

The chestnut embers  
were *Mr. Bryson and I*,  
by Mary Maynor,  
considered her magnum opus.  
You learned of it as a girl in Gdansk,  
at age nine,  
a year before you fled for good.

Mr. Bryson was a Black man.  
Mary was pasty white.  
She taught piano.  
And how to kiss.  
The keys: black, white,  
and the ones stained with sweat  
a streak-filled coffee/cream.

And there, a little closer,  
Lennon's bio,  
an annotated guide  
to Zen;

no Jews in sight,  
no Kristallnacht,  
just the amens,  
hallelujahs of old,  
the scent of corn dogs  
in Mississippi air.

**Dropping Acid**  
**or Oliver's Awakening at Lee-Anne's Potluck**

No, that isn't how it happened,  
you tell me, pouring our drinks  
beside the fire. It wasn't the  
hit-while-riding-the-bicycle thing at all,  
that's yet another unfound rumour.

We toast to mental health  
and you give the proper setting,  
the moment when he snapped, your friend,  
and how that actually made him smarter:

Wesley reciting the Beats,  
Borscht simmering  
a percussive accompaniment,  
Jenny Chang on the violin,  
lamenting war's not dead,  
it never dies, and all of our talk,  
simply that.

Pick a Preston lilac  
and say you haven't killed.  
Boil eggs at Easter  
and persuade that peace prevails.  
Call the five-and-dime tout de suite  
and cancel your reservation.  
There's work to be done.

Give the postman “return to sender”  
and throw your bills away.  
Tell the boss to fuck himself  
and the suits to shove it twice.  
Grow your hair down to your feet  
and trip on the stairs to the church.

Tell the children of God  
that you love the witch and homosexual,  
that Esau got a raw deal,  
that Thomas was a gullible skeptic,  
that it’s OK to admit to errancy,  
that teaching their kids to kiss the trees  
isn’t idolatry,  
turning princes to frogs not so bad  
when we consider the weight  
of crowns,  
of gold and of thorns.



## Picking Baby Names with the Toss of a Canadian Quarter

You felt the baby kicking  
and our time is running out.  
The books have left us quarrelling,  
Google's made it worse.

I want something rare –  
another *Stephen* or *Stephanie*  
isn't in the cards,  
and the trends you offer up,  
*Jessica*, *Kyle*, will never make the cut  
(so sorry, there are enough of you  
already).

Leafing through the Scriptures,  
there are those no longer in use,  
ones that we consider with a cringe:  
*Jezebel*, an evil witch and harlot,  
and *Bathsheba*, an exhibitionist at best.

And if it weren't for the connotations,  
*Lucifer* would be a lovely name  
and it's too bad it's associated with the devil  
and all. *Judas*, too, sounds rather sharp  
but our friends would take amiss.

Should we *put* the family Bible down  
and consider contemporary?

It depends on where we live  
you pitch in wryly and you're right:  
*Derek Jeter* gets egged in Boston  
and Yankee pinstripes damn him.  
*Katrina* is ousted in Orleans,  
the scourge of townsfolk flooded.

It isn't just geography,  
I add with my two cents.  
Sometimes, there is nowhere  
to go.

There's half a million *Michael Jacksons*,  
and all but one  
are using their middle initials.

Remember the price of war:  
*Stalingrad* got overturned  
and *Adolf* lost its luster  
with the German men and boys.

And the *Lee-Harvey* combo  
is no longer in vogue,  
that name is *Mudd*,

and *Quisling* is long since finished  
as far as the present Finnish go.

Unless you're Hispanic, *Jesus* is a no-no.  
We're unworthy of this holy name,  
one without stain of sin,  
the other side of the dichotomous coin.

Flip it for me, a quarter,  
and we'll choose one by fate and by chance.  
Pray that it's a girl,  
for *Buck* befits a dimwit  
and a PhD is out.

*Elizabeth*, and she's a queen,  
with longevity, grace,  
enough to make us proud;  
without stigma, shame,  
originality be damned.

## Chatting with Death over Chai

I met Death  
for tea today,  
surprised by its  
invitation,

sent  
nonchalantly  
like a post  
from a Facebook friend.

It asked  
how I was doing,  
why I hadn't  
cared to call,  
or write,  
or even think  
of its existence  
in the days and weeks  
gone past.

I said  
I'd been  
too busy,  
that Life  
snatched all my time  
(being the  
possessive sort  
that it is),

telling me to hurry,  
to walk a little faster,

put my heart  
out on the line.

I confessed to Death  
that it nagged me,  
*Life* that is,

like a spouse  
that cracks a whip,  
grinds me to the stone,  
imploing me to reach  
for unseen heights,

failing to configure  
that from there  
I tend to fall,  
*bruise* and break  
on the ground,

that it seems  
to disappear  
in the aftermath  
of plunging,

returning to rasp  
sweet nothings  
in the time  
I start to heal.

Life  
was once its friend,  
I hear from this jaded  
soul,

extra cream and sugar  
in its ever-steaming cup,

stinging  
from a throbbing hurt  
I didn't know  
it had,

treated oh so frosty –

like a neighbour  
that we see  
but never wave  
or smile at,

one  
we've heard  
bad things about,

lamenting  
its ostracism,

our blatant *hatred*  
of its name,

our avoidance  
at every cost,

our refusal  
to look it in the eye,

to hear *its* side  
of the story,

its claim it isn't  
so bad,

it's been  
misunderstood,

that it's here to shield  
and shroud us  
from the wounds  
that *Life*  
inflicts,

that breath  
is the ultimate villain,  
a hero  
of sham and spell,

Life's  
night of sleep—  
a *lie*,  
our pillows but a tease,

that only *it*,  
our scarlet-lettered  
Death,  
cold-shouldered to the bone,  
gives rest  
that won't be ruptured,  
time without a tick,

that its bond with Life  
was severed  
by assumptions  
that weren't true,

that Death  
was the cause of sorrow,  
we should flee it  
whenever we can,



and our lack  
of understanding  
that it keeps us sealed  
as seed,

buried,

safely *tucked*  
from the gales  
of living,

that it's calm  
and far more patient  
than this Life can ever be,

will wait for the ripest  
moment,  
a burst of solar swell,

before releasing us  
from its care,

to grasp at second birth  
and hope what blossoms  
will be kinder.

## **Richmond & Central**

There's an enticing young woman  
across the street  
running towards me.

She's just trying to beat  
the light, I know,  
coffee in her hand,  
spillage dropping  
to the painted pavement  
below –

those two white lines  
that tell pedestrians  
the boundaries  
where they may safely tread  
but safety is not on her mind,  
with the light a fleeting amber  
and her boots a scampering din

as I wait for the next  
circumspect walking figure  
to signal when it's time to go,  
not daydream of arcane girls  
I pretend are in love with me  
to the point they'd risk their lattes  
and their lives just to race  
into my waiting arms.

## Seven Day Rental

One of my students borrowed  
*La Maison du Plus Pied*  
by Jean-Pierre D'Allard,  
telling the rise, fall  
of the Sainte Bouviers,  
ensnared by riches,  
hatreds spawned  
and business won, lost,  
won & lost.

She recounts her favourite scene  
towards the end,  
where a liberated Marie  
slaps the face  
of brutal Serge, her husband,  
played by an aging  
Stephane DeJohnette.

It's the one-eighty,  
the turning point for both characters,  
the moment where love  
drops its transcendence,  
its fixed and static state.

I think Anise, my student,  
sporting occasional welts  
that I ask nothing about,  
has found a muse  
to lift her trampled spirit  
as she says  
*the film, the film.*

Yes it is such.

## His and Hers

In clashing closets,  
your reds mimic my blacks  
in starch and wrinkles,  
in pleats unkempt  
and the way that mothballs  
keep our earwigs at bay.

When we were younger,  
we shared our cramped enclosures,  
complemented  
pinks with blues,  
folded every sock  
and cashmere sweater,  
high heels and tennis shoes  
conjoined in copulation.

Now they're flung  
across the bedroom  
after a brutal day at work  
or an aggressive walk  
from the bus,

butts of cigarettes  
scenting the soles,  
snaps and laces  
securing our silence.

## The Violinist

I'll wait for you in the foyer,  
alit by a chandelier,  
and streetlights seen  
from the window sill.

I'll be sitting  
in the velvet chair,  
an antique too good  
to touch,  
but hardwood floors  
should not be soiled  
by shoes I've muddied in the rain.

As I dry,  
your lesson will come to a close,  
and the student that you love  
will leave some angel cake  
as thanks,

for teaching her Dvořák,  
his cycle of *Cypress Trees*,

perhaps  
unknownst  
of its origins,

how Antonín  
was inspired  
to write it,  
loving Josefina,  
his pupil in Prague,

watching her marry another,  
leaving a muse  
to scribe his work.

You will keep her gift  
in the freezer,  
not daring to warm  
in an oven,

eat,  
and be left  
with only the crumbs.

You'll buy tickets for two  
to the Symphony,  
the Number 6, in D Major,  
with me as reluctant guest;

and from  
a concealing balcony,  
you'll boast of your protégé,

that she's a cellist,  
violinist, as well.

You'll say the pastoral  
sequence to come  
is her finest musical moment,  
her strings ascending the others  
in an overture to *you*,

and it's only the ill-timed  
coughs from the audience  
that keep me from hearing it  
as so.



## Clichés

I'd like to damn the poets  
who've said it all before:  
the encounter with eyes  
as jewels. With hair that's gold  
in ponytails,  
that's brushed  
or held in braids.  
Who've met the small  
of slender backs  
and the curves of hips  
and their sway.

If only none had written  
of the bliss in a kiss of lips ...

I want to be the first to sing  
*you are the prettiest girl*  
*in the world* –  
and because a million bards  
have penned it,  
it's trashed as trite cliché.

O God of archaic  
verse and psalm,  
bring me back  
to English Dukes,  
to Scottish Dames and castles;

not to fight a flaming beast  
or bear the shield of the Lord –

instead, but for a moment,  
with feathered quill in hand,  
let me write of her radiant face,  
how it enraptures me,  
and her lissome, favoured figure,  
how I'd lose my life to hold.

Let me be the first  
to say, to state, to scribe *I love you*.  
Allow the pressman's ink to dry  
on antique, rolled-up parchment.  
Award the abbey's archivist  
the sealing of the Queen.  
*For it was never, ever heard  
of such a lovely maiden, fair –*  
for just this wondrous instant,  
a thousand and one years past,  
before the Shakespeares,  
Blakes and Burns have poems  
that scream from my horizon.

### **Priscilla, Asleep**

I've noticed,  
whenever you roll to your side,  
you take much of the blanket  
with you,

my legs and feet bereft,

left bare  
but ready to run,

into some sentry owl's  
night,

through ethereal  
sheers of fog,

should I renew  
my dream of old,

our missing  
child's  
*help,*

with neighbours  
roused  
by ruckus,

the slaps  
of a shoeless  
dash.

## **Grandfather's Room at the Greenwood Nursing Home**

The caregiver warned us  
about curtains,  
how they keep  
the sunshine out,  
that Venetian blinds  
are preferred,  
allowing the light  
to seep in slowly  
in your sleep.

This residents-wish-they-were-dead place  
never ceases to depress.  
And it's more than just the usual  
smell of urine.

Watch us watching  
watches  
and ponder lame excuses  
to leave.

You're somewhere else  
entirely,  
a decade ago  
we think:

*Let me try and show you  
how the Gordian knot  
was solved*

and

*We'll sing Opa  
Opa Opa*

like when Nana  
slipped out  
from beneath us.

## Valentine Memories

When we were in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade,  
I made you a card  
with red paper and mucilage.  
Drew your face in pencil crayon.  
Signed my name with the same:  
Happy Valentine's Day  
(from me and Fuzzy my cat).

In Junior High, in the Fall,  
I picked my mother's roses  
behind her back, preserved them  
in a book for months,  
then passed them onto  
you, nervously:  
all dried and petals falling.  
You've kept them in a jar  
for all this time.

In college, I got a cookbook  
from the library  
and endeavoured to make you a cake,  
failing in my measurements,  
stumbling in the steps.  
The result was hardly edible  
though you swallowed your only bite.  
It's still somewhere in the back  
of your freezer.

And just before you wed,  
on the fourteenth day  
of the second month,  
I made you a friendship ring  
from coloured strings  
of your favourite yarn –  
all woven, braided,  
to fit your slender finger.  
You wear it on occasion, I've heard,  
with the golden band your husband  
gave you that morning in the Church,  
when the sunshine poured  
through painted glass  
and I feigned a joyous smile  
from the darkest pew at the back,  
wept but in despair  
throughout the organ's loud refrain  
and when a truck outside the grounds  
rumbled madly down the road  
spreading salt.



## The Artists' Long Weekend

It was supposed to be  
a day off from the squabbles,  
from the debates on right & wrong  
and the five stone pillars  
of Western Imperialism.

Saturday I like you best.  
You leave your texts behind  
and Naomi Woolfe is kept  
in white sheep's cloth,  
talk of apple cobblers, chocolate sprinkles,  
as deep in thought as we'll ever get  
but not this time:

You battle greedy parking meters,  
wage war on 10-cent hikes,  
relive the Russian Revolution  
and complain of cookies  
looking better than they taste.

*Let us leave the bakery,*  
I say in reckless suggest,  
offering to whisk you  
to splendoured heights  
and the flashing bulbs of theatre.

You counterpunch,  
and the Museum it is,  
old relics left to rust  
behind coloured Chinese glass,  
and sculptures chipped & shorn.

*We're the only ones here,*  
we sadly slump and sigh,  
with nothing more to see,  
our disappointment  
caroming off walls  
as van Gogh in a straitjacket  
would have.

## A Station Wagon's Dead Transmission

The car broke down today,  
on a cold, pre-winter morning,  
and left us with options, three:

We catch a bus and learn the ropes  
of never-ever staring,  
of leaning left and right  
when staggering turns  
are made at red,  
of pretending not to notice  
when the man beside us slobbers  
as he speaks,  
to neither you nor I  
nor anyone in-between.

We take our *bikes* out  
from the shed,  
*put* our lives  
at stake,  
looking out  
for racing trucks and vans  
that honk their harried horns,  
that run us off the road  
and to an icy curbside tumble,  
wrought with bumps and cuts  
and shaken nerves.

Third and final pains us most:

We walk in awkward silence,  
the crunch of frosted sod,  
the small-talk that we mutter  
*saying* we are strangers,  
each step along the path  
revealing all that's lost  
and wanting.

**And about the wind, the branches will bend  
from its affection**

Though the sun and the rain  
take the credit or the blame,  
it's the wind that roars  
like a neglected middle child,  
receiving little thunder  
for its contribution to our lives  
(for it's the water, dear,  
that nourishes;  
the rays of our star  
that causes things to grow).

And scribes of old and new  
romance the heavens,  
the seas that tickle feet  
upon the beach,  
whispering now and then  
of the wind's surging power  
to make the surf  
that pummels sand  
and draws our shores,

strength reserved  
for the usual suspects,  
ignorant of the fact  
that the wind has had its fill  
of flapping flags,

hoisting balloons,  
raising bubbles blown by children,  
keeping kites  
from knotting in trees;

wishing to be something more,  
paradoxically less –  
gentler, yes,  
than even the breeze  
that guides our sails  
and bounces hair,

nudging tiny  
seeds  
when farmers  
miss their mark;

saving a moth  
by lifting it  
out of an awaiting spider's  
reach;

taking sides, perhaps, heroically,  
but never tearing  
wing or web  
in the effort.

## Poison Ivy

The lawyers had stamped and signed,  
the executor divvying up  
what was left of her possessions,  
and content or so we thought,  
we paid  
a belated call  
to the scanty cottage  
she'd called her home,  
two rooms of creaky floors  
and a kitchen more mildew than tile.

Grandma's abode  
had been neglected,  
no one paying visits  
while she rotted her final days.

We expected something pretty,  
the irises we were pledged,  
the gladioli and ripe persimmons,  
not the brambly knots of branches  
free of foliage,  
prickly green  
popping up  
where the perennials once had stood,

leaving us to wonder if the bulbs  
had birthed a miracle,  
somehow dug themselves  
out of their dirt,

snuck away  
in the thickest night  
while the owls and bats bid adieu,

and later  
found the graveyard  
where she rested,  
draping her headstone  
with dangling blooms

as we took out  
our corroded spades,  
our hoes and bending saws,  
and cut away the chaff,  
wiping foreheads  
with our forearms,  
soaking in our inheritance.



## On my leaving you, unexpectedly

I've booked three men  
and a cargo truck  
for this Thursday, October 1<sup>st</sup>.

They'll come promptly, at 8 a.m.,  
too early for an encore  
of our Timbits, milk & tea.

My dirty clothes, in garbage bags,  
my science books wrapped tightly  
in Friday's wrinkled *Globe and Mail*.

"Herbert, the Happy Hippo,"  
won at last year's Western Fair  
(on my final throw-to-the-wall, no less),  
discarded for curbside pick-up.  
Even its grinning, glued-on mouth  
has fallen.

In my desk, a will  
(you'll get it *all*, my dear),  
paperclips aplenty,  
all loose and without a box;  
your love letter,  
from seventh-grade,  
signed, "yeah, it's me" –

and under a sheet of résumé bond,  
a rotten sketching  
of your pretty face:  
faint smile, eyes looking away  
at something I can't remember.

You posed for half an hour, sensing  
I couldn't draw to save my life  
and we knew it didn't matter.

### **Bob, Hospital Janitor**

He's showered with disdain  
by candy wraps and bubble-gum,  
by pools of the great unflushed,  
and though he's cleared  
contagions beneath our steps,  
cleaned our counters of its germs,  
he's open season for callous jokes  
and blackened fruit mere inches  
from the basket meant to catch  
what ranks and rots.

*That's what he's paid for*  
is the license to squalor,  
turning his rubber gloves  
from cotton white  
to garbage brown.

He doesn't have a caddy  
and oysters missed the menu  
by some ninety grand or so.  
His office holds a mop and broom  
and no one comes to call  
when *M.D.*'s not on the door.

His trudge in drizzled night  
awakes a nagging, seal-like cough –  
for doctors have their pick to park,  
their choice of seats and sex,  
and he should have finished *Ehrlich*  
when he had his only chance,  
and learned to look the dying  
in their soiled, watered eyes.

### **She's the Bookworm of Santo Domingo**

William Faulkner's got his hold on you  
with Gretna Green and Ernestine  
but he's really not the bard  
you thought he was  
because he hasn't made you cry  
like Cohen does  
when he's on his game  
or Emily  
because you know she lived alone  
in that big old house  
when she should have been on her back  
and getting laid.  
Such passion.

Sylvia Plath married an ingrate  
who became the laureate,  
the toast of the town  
but you know that rascal Ted  
lost out in the end  
and she was quite the swimsuit charmer  
(and a *poet* to boot).

Your soft spot's for Henry Miller  
and his *Rosy Crucifixion*,  
and though your mother thinks  
it's literary,

it's just a cunning way  
to do some porn  
without you ever getting caught.

But Nabokov's your idol  
because he told it like it is  
and every forty-something teacher  
you've ever come to know  
has yearned to fondle your budding breasts  
and painting outstretched toenails  
is just the appetizer  
for something deeper.

*Leaves of Grass* is Whitman's triumph  
and makes you look respectable  
when you carry it around,  
an iPod filling your ears  
with Gregorian chants,  
*ignoring* the boy in heat  
who runs behind you, heart a thunder,  
staining his pants and calling your name.

## Playing Chess with Dr. Kreidel

In his younger-than-fifty days,  
the professor's music played:  
a Verdi season,  
a Brahms concerto,  
a triumphant crescendo of brass.

Today, in his tie  
and cardigan sweater,  
his bearded chin supported  
by an anchored, open hand,  
the only accompaniment found  
comes from the waft of his cigar,  
left to rest forgotten  
in a dish to catch the ash.

Thirteen minutes.  
He never takes more  
or less when making  
his pondered,  
predictable move.

*Did I tell you  
when Aiden died,  
how his mother refused to weep?*

I've yet to see the photos  
of the wife and son, now gone.  
They're only ever mentioned  
in the times of his Bishop's move.

My Knight's the first to go.  
It always seems to be.  
Something about the horse's head  
that makes him go for throat.

*The man of cloth  
had told us, "he's in a far,  
better place."  
Aiden's mother left me,  
saying he'd been too young  
to ride.*

A pillar of smoke  
arises,  
as if pushed  
by a lantern's swing,  
as though  
a gift of incense  
from the hands  
of God's High Priest.



I pretend the smell's not pungent,  
that my lungs will never mind,  
that I relish returning home  
smelling of an old-time carnival.

My Rook, in turn, takes Queen,  
in a forty-one second wait.  
*Check.*

The professor slumps  
and chortles,  
grabs his vice,  
takes a puff.  
*This is good.*  
*I'm much better off*  
*this way.*

In the twelve-plus minutes  
that follow,  
I'll *absorb* the awkward silence,  
stare at paintings on the wall:

Courbet,  
de La Tour,

eye the futile  
*back-and-forthing*  
of his fingers  
gripping King,

my empathic throat lumping  
when I know he can't let go.

## For every poet who knows what it's like

There's a woman in the front row  
who has started to cough.

I spent seven wretched hours  
on a rancid bus to get here,  
to read poetry in this bookshop,  
in front of fifty-six people  
and now one of them  
is coughing up a squall,  
doing a fabulous seal imitation,  
lacking only flippers  
and an inflatable ball.

The store had laid out padded chairs  
and a table full of books –  
mine and those of a trio of poets  
who'd read 'fore my turn had come:

in feather-dropping silence,  
in monastic quietude,  
in that attentive hush that happens  
when the audience is rapt in words.

I raise my voice in hopes of drowning  
the woman's incessant hacks,  
bellowing *there's truth in affirmation*  
*and in eyes that see past stars!*

And my pacing is off,  
my inflection is chaotic,  
my ability to focus  
easily thwarted  
by gurgling phlegm.

I want to stop abruptly –  
ask her what her problem is,  
if she's a smoker who's never quit,  
if she waited for *me* to begin my set  
before unleashing her pent-up noise.

But I forge *on* in a smouldering stride,  
thankful I've saved  
my favourite poem  
for the climactic dénouement,  
grateful she's just left her seat  
and gone off to the back of the shop,

where, if I'd been more observant,  
I would have *noticed* the coffee bar,  
the gleam  
of frothing machines,  
*figured* she'd forego  
the Buckley's,

embrace the whirr  
that cappuccinos bring.

## Twenty Eighty-One

*Happy New Year to our Nepalese and Bengali communities! Nava Barsha 2081 and Happy Pohela Boishakh!*

—City of London post on X (formerly Twitter),  
April 15, 2024

As it turns out,  
I'm not shackled  
to 2024. I can move through time  
and put the past  
behind me—  
by becoming Nepalese.

I like the thought of  
2081,  
far removed  
from the plague  
of the early 2020s,

the culture wars,  
the mass of humanity  
at one another's  
throats, in every  
battlefield, comment  
section in sight.

It's a leap of almost  
*sixty* years, perhaps that  
long-awaited step on  
Martian soil, the moon base  
we were promised  
back in 1976,

and 9/11 but an octagon  
of decades  
in the dust.

I won't say there's flying cars,  
every futurist and their robot  
getting it wrong, since the days  
of Elroy Jetson,  
of *Blade Runner*  
replicants,

no jump in our evolution,  
elongated arms,  
heads about to burst  
from the enormity  
of our brains;

our skins  
haven't blended  
into grey, the apes  
have yet  
to revolt,

and religion  
is still around

but *that's* to be expected—

in Judaism, after all,  
it's 5784,  
and it still  
believes in God,  
in some promised, Holy  
Land, that manna  
can fall from the clouds  
(if we only pray  
fervent enough),

that the sting of  
Holocaust

wasn't so long ago,

in fact still  
in *their* century,  
when every Jew  
was put in boxcars  
towards a “shower,”  
a pair of striped  
pajamas,

and even the Führer's  
Volkswagen  
had yet to reach the sky.



## The Child

Yes, yours was the most unusual  
of reasons,  
to avoid the city playgrounds,  
the parks where noisy children  
race amok.

*One of these little boys  
will be the death of me* you said,  
singling out  
the preschool lad  
on the base of the monkey bars.  
*A murderer,  
when he's all grown up,  
one of them has to be.*

You quote statistics, demographics,  
the laws of happenstance.  
*Look at his cherub innocence,  
that ice cream-covered face.*

For whatever wayward reason  
he will turn,  
despise a younger sibling,  
his mother's scolding ways,  
learn that knives can do much more  
than slice an orange, butter bread.

You'll pass him on the sidewalk  
in the future,  
your purse will tantalize,  
sway with every cane-abetted  
step,

or, on a night you're even older,  
you'll *answer* fervent knocks,  
shed your caution  
when it's due,  
his blade upon your throat  
upon his entrance,  
no hint of recognition,  
no sub-atomic  
memory  
of your eyeing his every  
leap,

when he fell  
upon a stone  
and you were near,

stuck a bandage  
where he'd bled.

## Autumn Green

The backyard tree  
has shed  
its Joseph's coat  
of many colours,

the agèd, lofty maple  
leaving assorted threads  
to clear:

The red ones  
were afire  
as Antares,  
ready to supernova,  
explode  
in silent splendour,

the orange, yellow-gold,  
like the citrus fruit  
they mimicked,

catching *light*  
from a southern sun  
and drawing eyes  
to the crown  
that held them;

yet it's this fallen  
green on grass  
that now has garnered  
my attention,

brings ensnarement  
to my sight

as my rake gathers  
the limbless  
on the ground.

It seems locked  
within its youth,  
nary a crease  
or wrinkled part

while its verdant edges  
call to mind  
the early days of June –

which leaves me then  
to wonder  
why it fell,

looking full  
of chlorophyll,

as if it never  
would have shifted  
tone or colour.

Perhaps it simply  
couldn't bear  
to dangle  
lonely  
on a branch,

its brilliant brethren  
lifeless,  
unable to flap  
in the breeze;

that none  
would care to sit  
beneath a bony tree  
as this –

naked, as its neighbours,

with arms of gnarled wood  
and all but barren  
of its beauty,

save the leaf  
that wouldn't change,  
bear resemblance  
to the one  
that's on our flag,

that missed  
October's chance  
at blazing out  
in a gloried state,

that couldn't stand  
the quiet  
that longevity  
inevitably  
brings.

## **The Twig**

In the braided brush  
it sits,  
at the base of that  
which held it,  
robbed of all  
potential  
by a walker  
unaware,  
the push  
of a careless  
hand –

for you would have been  
a branch, mighty,  
housing birds  
and a path for squirrels,  
coloured leaves  
and a cloak of snow,

upheld the  
silence  
of the air,  
the hush  
of forest frost,  
the sleep  
before the snap  
from boots below.

## Secondary Thoughts from a Street Sign

The right-hand turn  
in detour brought me  
*to* this boulevard,  
with its generic  
rancher dwellings  
and two cars stationed  
in each drive,  
as if on call  
for the kids  
I assume inhabit  
these gaudy homes.

There's a distant yellow marker  
*coinciding* with a curve,  
getting larger  
by the second:

Ahead,  
*Slow Children*  
becoming clear  
as I coast just past  
an oak,  
like an older *Yield*  
but diamond-shaped  
with a vaguer sense  
of message.



Whoever could *be* these  
“slow children”  
and what’s the cause  
of their sluggish gait?  
How leisurely  
must they be  
to merit a municipally-  
funded sign?  
And why don’t I ever see them  
though there’s a warning  
that they exist?

Perhaps they’re not in a hurry  
in those moments they *do* appear,

*without* the need  
to be on time  
and *too laid back* to care,  
content to be so nonchalant  
*crossing* this particular street,

requesting drivers  
to *please take care*,

*place your dress shoe  
on the brake  
and ease your fingers  
off the horn,*

*there's seldom a reason  
to rush,*

*and we doubt that we'll be  
running away  
or leaving  
anytime soon.*

## Coffee

You brewed tea  
for the two of us,  
after I'd poured  
my coffee,  
my morning mantra,  
its Colombian aroma  
competing with the scents  
of Ceylon.

And yes, your set  
of sandstone cups  
look so much prettier  
than my mug,  
contain  
Tibetan characters  
carved within.

And of course,  
it might be better for me,  
my dear,  
your herbs and caffeine-free,  
your elixir's vow  
of longevity.

But there's a kind of grit,  
an aftertaste,  
that's part of my every day.  
I take it with me to the office,  
as I pass the urban beggars,  
the off-key, curbside buskers  
ever-imploring me  
for change,

guessing  
nary one of them  
even *thinking* of a tea,  
its tonic leaves of green,  
its detachment from them  
and from me.

## **Alice, Mother**

In your photos  
you are young:

The world in black  
and white,  
ripple-bordered,  
secured in albums  
by a glue  
now hard as amber.

Your man's  
in a fedora,  
leaning proud  
against the Buick  
he brought you to  
the movies in.

In another  
you are smiling  
(which I've never  
seen you do),  
your sweater  
bouncing light  
blessed of the sun,

your eyes looking  
upward  
as if a plane  
were overhead.

You tell me stories  
of the war,  
how he went away  
to fight,

a pilot  
dropping bombs  
on German bases,

*never cities  
or children hit,*

how the message  
said he'd died,  
shelled by anti-  
aircraft strike,  
plunging to the  
ground  
(the curse of  
gravity).

*There's a chance  
he may have lived  
and the Captains  
didn't know.*

You think,  
in his supposed  
loss-of-memory,  
he met a Parisian  
girl,  
raised a son  
he called André,  
who drives  
across this land  
in lunar glow,  
at his father's  
stayed request,

looking for *you*  
in every seniors' home  
in sight,

saying *il vit!*  
*il vit!*  
(he lives!)

and, *ma mère*,

knowing you surely  
would have birthed him  
had the drums of war  
been mute,

had eyes  
not seen the red  
mar hues of  
grey.



## The Winemaker's Son

In your sour middle age  
you are drunk  
on grapes, fermented.

I choose to recall your visage  
in another, kinder vision:

the child who picked  
the purple  
from his father's  
ripened vines,  
popping globules  
in your mouth  
on days that *he*  
had gone away,

your wincing an attest  
that they were tart,

yet the sweetest thing  
to burst upon your tongue,

much better than the fallen,  
the ones upon the ground  
assigned for birds and the boy  
he cursed.

## Elegy in the Eleventh Month

As done to sun,  
the clouds of drizzled dawn  
have cloaked your presence,

curtains closed  
within your brick abode.

And in your garden's gloom,  
where the colours rose and stood,  
the brown of twigs entwined,  
the dirt dug up by squirrels  
which had abounded.

Your thoughts reflect the wife  
who'd worked the ground,  
who'd sung the heaven hymn  
of lark and jay,  
in the clear of tearless day.

But now, your sound  
of laboured breath, the callous  
click of clock,

your wanting of what's white,  
the snow that shrouds the loss  
of what was living.

## Clothing

Today was less eventful  
than the norm,  
the ho-hum talk  
of boredom  
leading to subjects  
rather silly:

most notably,  
while sorting through  
laundry, how our clothes  
are lifeless shrouds,  
merely wrappers  
without a will:

gloves with palms and fingers  
and yet unable to wave  
on their own,  
turn a *handle*  
without a hand  
that's slipped within;

the dress that's frilled and airy,  
the *perfect* attire  
for dance, too *weak*  
to spin and shimmy  
without your figure  
to flesh it out;

my collared shirt  
and pants,  
whose elbows, knees,  
can't bend  
(helpless  
without my bones);

and our shoes that only dream  
of walking solo,  
to the very ends of the earth,  
beholden  
to the *feet*  
that lift and lead,  
nothing in our closet  
that's beneath them.

## Quakers

Our new neighbours,  
the couple we've yet to meet,  
the pair who cling to Bibles  
securely snuggled beneath their arms,  
are always garbed in black,  
have yet to crack a smile,  
raise a chuckle,  
wave *hello*.

The *Welcome Wagon* hostess  
told you all about their faith,  
news that made me cringe  
with prejudice.

I spy them from the slit  
between two drapes,  
believing that they're sour,  
puritanical,  
that they never have sex  
or fun.

You wanted me  
to break the ice  
the evening before the last,  
while I washed my compact car,

observing  
how they glumly rocked  
in shabby, squeaky chairs,  
on their drab, unflowered porch,  
as I rinsed the suds away,

that I should extend a caring hand,  
*introduce* myself with a sob,  
offer condolences  
from us both,

that someone  
must have  
passed away,

that they're merely  
just in mourning,

saying that they're *Quakers*,  
the *Society of Friends*,

that they'd laugh  
and run  
and *be* much more  
outgoing,

that they'd cartwheel  
on their lawn,  
play some hopscotch  
in the street,  
if a *beloved*  
hadn't died,

that they provide  
our morning cheer,  
our oatmeal, *Cap'n Crunch*,

that when they meet  
at Sunday's dawn,  
there's peace  
in the hills around us,

that the ground  
is only shaking  
from the unleashing  
of their dance.

## Ode to Olivia

I'll sign my pseudonym to your confession,  
echo expletives in overture,  
regretting the passing through birth canals,  
*staging* reenactments  
of the favourite, precious moments  
from the history of Hillside High:

How they tore your dress  
in ribbons,  
keeping snippets as souvenirs,  
your weeks of toil  
on your mother's machine  
all for fucking naught.

And when your face broke out  
in acne,  
you'd said it was a case of hives,  
caused by the stress  
of obligations,  
that your father fell behind  
in clipping coupons,  
your brother  
caught on tape in tights  
your former friend forsook,  
that, and the rest of memorabilia,  
home to spiders making nests  
in all your letters penned to boys.



Now no one writes by hand:  
tapping emojis on their phones  
or clicking left on a plastic mouse,  
while those annoying ringtones  
clench your fists and badger  
your Spock-like ears,  
hearing    *I just called*  
*to say    I love you*  
on the cell of a passer-by,  
thinking *Superstition* would have been  
a better choice,  
something Stevie's not ashamed  
to say he sang.

You know I never thought you *fat*,  
that *unibrow*  
was a dumb-ass word  
from the kids rolling grass  
in the pit, near the schoolyard,  
while the principal turned his nose  
and feigned congestion.

You cry that kindergarten  
was a *kinder* place,  
that cruelty, though innate,  
had yet to fruit and flower,  
still covered in inches of ice.

Let's go back to the monkey bars  
and hang upside-down  
while it snows,  
feeling flakes  
melt on our faces  
as the blood goes rushing to our heads,  
suspending the law of gravity  
or pretending to the world that we *can*,  
on any given moment, without notice –  
  
deferring our death if we want to.

## Cassiopeia

On our anniversary,  
we spend the evening  
gazing at the stars

yet not as lovers do,  
making wishes  
on ones that fall,  
but imagining instead  
there's an alien couple  
on some distant  
speck-of-a-world,

not quite as human as us,  
with a few of their organs  
flipped around,  
but still the kind of people  
we'd relate to,

not as deeply "in love"  
as before,  
yet *enough*  
to never leave  
the other,

and we wonder  
if they think  
they'd each be happier  
in the arms of another,

if they too  
have awkward silence  
in the aftermath  
of a quarrel,

if they believe that they can last,  
at least, until the offspring  
are all grown up,

if they envision  
what it would feel like  
to have their spouse,  
unexpectedly,  
pass away,

and if they'd ever survive  
a frigid night  
looking *up* at the sky  
without them.

## Garden Sunrise

We say the birds  
are singing when we wake,  
our assumption  
that they're happy.

When I open the window  
on this cloudless Summer  
morning,  
I hear *chatter*, not scales  
and notes ascending,  
like where the worms  
might be burrowing  
or that the widow  
has placed fresh seed,

or beware,  
that cat's been eyeing us  
again,  
from the camouflage  
of shrubs,  
or did anyone catch  
what the cardinal was up to  
last night?

Perhaps it is *they*  
who need to hear:

a gently played concerto,  
a yoking of keys  
and of strings,

and so I'll raise my record's  
volume,  
tell Bernstein to conduct  
with calm,  
have Bach conveyed in arias  
with *elongated*  
pause,

where the robins, if they want to,  
can take a break  
from breakfast gossip,  
blend with the *second*  
pastoral movement,  
or the scherzo,

take a moment to brighten their day  
we may have judged, in err,  
as joyful.

## Family Photo

It hadn't been seen  
in ages  
(if a decade  
can be deemed  
as such),  
there, in the frame,  
a mother and father  
ecstatic,  
grateful you've entered  
their world;

and you'll feel  
the photo  
in front of you,  
strain a tear  
for the parents  
that were,

for there's but twice  
in your life  
where you're loved  
so very deeply  
(and which you'll have  
no recollection):

at the moment of passing  
and burial,

and that magnificent morning  
of sun,  
where you're cradled  
in wraps of white,  
in your mother's crib of arms,  
your enveloping father  
proud, beaming,

the wound of words  
an egg, untouched  
by swim of seed.



## Minus 21 and falling

It is colder than before,  
the other night  
I complained of chills,  
and frost embossed  
on windowpanes;

that which they call *cancer*  
eating away my insulation.

Bring me a second sweater,  
my cherub. Wrap me  
in scarves and a toque.  
Clothe my feet in woolly socks  
and give me tea to drink,

hot enough to warm my hands  
when they hold the steaming cup,  
but not so hot they burn  
or bring me back to vibrant nights  
we spent on other, happier things

and my hands cupped  
your breasts and ass  
and I knew nothing of the cold.

## Camomile Tea

Camomile  
supplanted your caffeine,

this gentle, calming herb  
no *longer* just a toast  
in winter's night,  
the warmth of a second  
quilt;

it went on double-duty,  
helping nerves to settle  
down, be unfrayed,  
keeping phantoms  
past and present  
from taking form,

each sip a sheep  
that's tallied  
under sun,  
making mellow  
each moment's breath,

bidding dreams to offer trailers  
of the features soon to come,

where flowers  
by the billions bloom,  
and no face is void of beauty.

### Upon scribbling another poem on dying

the writer bid adieu  
to the spray-paint tags  
and needles,  
the cracking plaster walls  
and the busy bars  
of intoxicants;

purchased  
a humble cottage  
in the country,  
at the time the sap  
was dripping,

and the words as well  
grew sweeter,  
the maples in the stanzas  
to *nevermore* be cut,

cleared away for sprawl  
or serve as paper for a poem  
that spewed of cities,  
their muffled hunger pangs,  
their riffs of jazz and blood.

## **On the loneliness of drowning**

The moment you are drowning  
is a time you're not alone.  
Somewhere in this world,  
at this very same instant,  
someone else has slipped  
beneath the surface of the water:

perhaps a doting father  
or a wide-eyed little girl,  
a homeless youth swept off a pier  
or a banker from a plunging plane,

their lungs  
filling with the wet  
that quickly kills,  
their arms and legs all flailing  
in an effort to reach for air.

Unlike all the other  
ways to die –  
by bullet or by flame,

by the weight of crumbling walls  
whenever the ground begins to quiver,

by the stealthy crawl of cancer  
or the inevitable toll of age –

drowning has a way,  
for a moment,  
of allowing the dead  
to float,  
as though in orbit  
around the globe,

of letting *currents*  
carry corpses  
to their eventual resting place –  
somewhere in the deep  
from which we came,  
all of us that creep  
upon the earth,  
*beyond* the reach of  
memory.

But back to you  
who may be drowning  
and the *ones* who share your plight,  
think of how *they're* feeling,  
the gulf now black  
around them,  
a cold far greater than ice,

a startled school of fish  
watching closely,

suddenly *thankful*  
for their gills,

envision how they struggle,  
offer prayer  
to whatever God  
of their up-  
bringing;

ponder in that second  
if you'll meet them in the sky,  
in that blue that mimics oceans,  
lakes and churning seas,

wonder if what follows  
will ever loosen  
this new-found bond,  
with your fellow sub-  
mariners:

the warming breath of angels,  
a calming flood of stars,

their ever-eternal effort  
to keep you dry.

## State Flower of Arkansas

It's in the vase  
you placed  
in the hall,  
after the night  
we heard the twang,  
the song  
that played  
unexpectedly

to our impromptu  
bare embraces,

our kisses too fervent  
for friends –

a single Apple  
Blossom: pink and white,

the *Pyrus*  
*Coronaria*,

from the state  
'side Tennessee;

it harks *back*  
to munching cattle  
in the fields,

to trucks  
that dust the sides  
of gravel roads,

to a cowbell  
calling all  
to Sunday lunch.

And now it speaks  
in a tongue  
we cannot hear,

an ethereal  
*howdy* and drawl,

the unexpected  
spell  
of strangest days.



## In Late Afternoon Shadows

I picked you out from the crowd  
although your slender back was turned,  
with a gathering throng  
to challenge your spotting  
like a *Where's Waldo?* book –

and when you asked  
how I managed to do this  
with my glasses scratched  
and autumn's umbrae  
shrouding hippies & hipsters alike,  
I said I recognized you by your

ass, particularly taut and rounded  
by the shifts of shade and radiance  
within which you'd been standing,  
during this surrealist time of day  
that dares me to say things  
I really shouldn't,

when change is just a jig  
beneath a tired, slumping sun  
that's given me more  
than I've ever asked of it.

## On My Literary Failure

The poem I've written isn't good enough.  
It surely won't win an award,  
be published in a magazine  
or make the list of "Selected Verse."

I don't even know why I wrote it.  
There was nothing inspiring me,  
no thoughts of a long-past love,  
no longing for a present-day face.  
To tell the truth, I was too tired  
to write anything at all,  
had considered going to bed early  
and not worrying myself about writing  
a poem – good or otherwise.

The problem is that not only is this poem  
not good, it isn't even mediocre.  
It's one of my lousier offerings, to be frank,  
and the fact that I'm even writing it at all  
breaks the unwritten rule  
about penning too many poems  
about writing poems,  
since poems about poems  
shows that the poet was too lazy  
and uninspired  
to actually write about something  
meaningful  
and instead took the easy way out.

For it's clear there's no metaphor here  
or clever devices that poets use.  
I'm just whipping out words  
with very little effort and it shows.  
It fully deserves the rejection slips  
it will undoubtedly encounter  
throughout its many travels.

It will be the filler poem,  
the last one shoved into the envelope  
to make the submission an even five.  
It will be the spare one,  
the one that's always unpublished  
and ready to go  
if an editor friend needs one,  
on short notice,  
for their third-rate Journal/Anthology,  
the one the better-known poets  
will never bother to send to.  
The kind you don't want to waste  
your "good" poems on.

I'll pretend I wrote it just for that,  
and that I made a special effort  
to do so, getting up at 3 a.m.,  
stepping lightly on my toes  
so as not to awaken the cat,

and making a cup  
of warm milk in the process  
because it's an ungodly hour  
to drink something stronger.  
That after a sip or two,  
I chose to pour it  
over a bowl of cereal  
since breakfast  
was only a few hours away  
and I needed the strength to finish.  
That I struggled until dawn  
over every word, comma,  
line-break,

and if a rival poet that I know  
happens to see this wretched piece,  
I'll blame an overcast sky  
for its vapid state,  
its piss-poor stanzas,  
spoiling the sunrise I was waiting for  
and a subject other than this,

saying my poem about the night  
yielding to day,  
about the ever-elusive muse  
I nearly caught,  
would have been glorious  
if not for that.

## **The Monk of St. Marseille**

Your prayers  
are duly recited  
in the Latin you learned  
while young –

yet still  
you fail to forget her,  
your unrequited  
love,

her voice a melodic  
scale, sacred  
as Gregorian  
chant,

without brass  
or string  
to accompany,  
divine in its naked key.

## The Carnation

The carnation I left you  
was given with much pondering –  
not as romantic, they'll say,  
as its more beloved, historic rival,  
the rose;

not as many songs and poems  
describing its allure;

without plethora  
of oil paintings  
to capture its pale pink petals  
on canvas –

but please remember, darling,  
it will last a little bit longer,  
even if but a day,  
those extra, precious hours to say  
*I love you, I'm sorry, come back to me.*

## The After Christmas

The tree is dismantled,  
limb by artificial  
limb,  
boxed in its cardboard coffin,  
while its coloured lights  
and trinkets sit  
forlorn,  
between the jam  
and pickle shelves;

the wreaths  
pitched like horseshoes  
into the closet of hiatus,  
with cards & bows & ribbons  
and things I hoard  
with no discernment.

And yet  
they're the lucky ones—  
they'll return in ten months time  
(being November's never-too-early),  
unlike the banished to garbage bins:

re-gifted no-name chocolates  
(from my cousin, ever-cheap),  
well past their *best before*;

the sweater from *Le Chateau*,  
with its gaudy dots and patterns  
that scream *hey look*,  
*I'm haute couture!*

And the mistletoe  
that failed me Christmas Eve,  
while you checked out several stockings  
crookedly hung,

then slapped my entitled face  
when I attempted  
an old tradition.



### **That guy in those commercials**

He's always there in the background, laughing.  
With a dozen attractive "friends" –  
all of them feigning laughter.  
See him holding a beer, laughing.  
And later at a steakhouse,  
encircled by happy people,  
laughing his cares away.

The only time we've seen him  
is when he laughs.

He's never appeared  
in a sitcom,  
or as a blur in a feature film.  
A paltry line of dialogue  
seems forever out of reach.  
But still he looks ecstatic,  
with a grin that's even broader  
than the "Pepsodent Twins" of old.

We imagine when he is home,  
in a shabby, bachelor walk-up  
several miles from Rodeo Drive,  
that he barely cracks a smile,

watches those who have succeeded  
being featured on *Tonight*, trading chuckles  
with Jimmy Fallon,

hurls his curses at the screen  
whenever his ads run back-to-back.

## **Not the Madonna I had in Mind**

The elegiac  
piano suite  
I was to write a eulogy to  
has gone missing.

It was fitting, funereal,  
backed by a Venetian  
choir to the Virgin,

and would have helped me  
to write a tribute  
to a neighbour  
who's passed away:

of how she'd fed  
the dishevelled poor,  
been a tender, doting parent,  
a community's  
concrete mast.

Instead,  
with the clock my sudden foe,  
I slip in the nearest disc,  
an '80s guilty pleasure,

and now the tempo  
isn't conducive  
for verses so morose,  
for words that beckon tears,

and I find myself too flippant,  
of making wisecracks  
in solemnity's stead,

of envisioning  
how badly  
the deceased  
may have danced,

how often she was drunk,

what the circumstances were  
when she was touched  
for the very first time.

## **Tanka**

Our daughter races,  
attempting to catch the birds.  
If she had the wings  
of a pigeon, she'd leave us,  
dropping occasional notes.

## Asiago

In my childhood,  
the moon, of course, was made of cheese  
but not just any pressed milk curd  
or the expected block of Swiss  
but rather *Asiago*, the kind the other kids  
had never heard of,  
whose mothers never sliced  
and sloppily shoved beneath their ham,  
the type that got me beat up,  
by the bully who thought me  
a snob,  
whose idea of fancy dining  
was potato chips on the side,  
whose fists I never forgot  
whenever midnight glow  
slipped through the  
crack of blinds,  
from a drifting ball above me,  
that may have stopped to pity  
when I cried myself to sleep.

## Exhalation

*Breath is the bridge which connects life  
to consciousness, which unites your body  
to your thoughts.*

– Thich Nhat Hanh

My muses  
must have fled from me  
before  
my coffee fix,

in the crash  
of afternoon,  
my pages white  
and naked,

in clamour  
that comes  
from *nothing*,

leaving me feeling  
foiled,  
unable to pen  
my poem.

I opt instead  
for inertia,

open windows  
bringing breezes  
from the west,

sibilating  
stories  
of the sphere,

wind that carries  
exhalation  
from peasants  
in the field,  
who groan  
while bending backs  
and picking rice;

from mothers  
in their push  
to birth their babes,  
and the cries that come  
the moment  
they emerge,  
cords cut,  
bottoms slapped  
with care;



from orations  
from the senates  
of the world;  
the homilies  
of the holy;  
the prayers  
of all devout;

from the schoolboy  
spouting love  
into the ears  
of his first  
crush;

an alcoholic's  
song of rote  
into a stumbling,  
crooked night;

the death-bed gasps  
of the sick and grey  
in the seconds  
before they die;

from a waitress  
and her drag  
on cigarette,

in her too-short break  
from servitude;

from all the creatures  
of the forests  
of the earth,  
the hunters and their prey,  
the yelps and screams  
of the kill;

by the will  
of currents, carried,

co-mingled in jet-  
stream,

abating breath  
that lightly ruffles  
the adjacent  
chimes and sheers.

*Poetry*, it heaves.

*This*  
*is poetry.*

## Cavendish Park

You picked chrysanthemums for me  
and I asked *is it the proper thing to do?*  
Their colour would fade, I said, petals wilt  
and life give way to death.

We ran through grass  
and crushed its green  
deep in the spongy earth.

We celebrated the living,  
stomping ant hills in our wake  
and swatting flies that came too close.

We didn't mean to, really,  
take the role of sinners  
purging blood reborn  
in sacramental wine;  
we preferred the blue, the white of clouds  
aloft, heads drawn to heaven,  
asking *why* we were no better.

## **The Better Kiss**

Today I kiss  
your monochrome photo  
more fervently  
than I do you –

maybe it's because of the way  
the paper bends  
back  
when I do,  
its passionate manner  
of yielding,

or that the gloss  
on the page  
tastes better than the one  
on your lips,

or perhaps the black & white  
of print  
is more pretty, candid,  
than all the gaudy hues of red  
you've caked your frown-of-a-face  
with.

## Too Happy

We say we're too happy  
to write any poems,  
our usual musings  
inspired by misery,  
our current state of bliss  
not conducive  
for an elegy in rhyme.

But I say that this is good,  
that I'd *prefer* an empty notebook  
to one that's filled with ink,

finding metaphors  
for what has died, been lost,

finding rhythm in a land  
bereft of trees,

or in a lover waking up  
to a vacant bed,

in a child mourning  
at her mother's funeral,  
her father hit by shells  
in a far-off war,

*burned* off the face of an earth  
filled with poetry.

## The Shower

The pounding on the door  
says *hurry the hell up!*

Have it your way, dear:  
I'll emerge with hair unkempt,  
still wet but apple-scented.

I swear I didn't mean  
to use the *last* of your shampoo,

my eyes were *shut* when I groped,  
while I palmed the bottle's nape,

like that *time* on a wobbly  
ladder,  
five or six years old,

*stretching* for autumn fruit,

in Uncle Richard's  
country orchard,

afraid of slips and falls,

of biting into worms  
should my *feet* be firm,  
unfailing.

## **May Song**

Branch's buds  
burst into blossoms,  
pinkish petals,  
grass-green leaves.

Love leaves  
its speckled eggs  
in nests.

Eggs are birds  
yet to be born.

Flight is love ascending,  
wings but leaves  
not fastened to trees.

## Snow Peas

At first glance,  
the snow peas are strangling  
the peppers –  
the stringy ends  
of their stretching vines  
wrapped  
around their neighbour's  
stem, tugging them  
by the "throat."

Then, another perspective  
offered:

*It's not of violence  
or of struggle,  
the Bodhisattvas murmur  
from the brush,  
always finding the good  
below the surface,  
it's the longing of love's  
embrace.*

*They too have need  
of this, don't you see?*



## Goodwill Hunting

I scoop her book out of the bargain bin  
and at a dollar, it's precisely that.

I hadn't heard of the author before,  
and this title, twenty years past  
its original release,  
shows little wear or evidence  
that it was barely ever read.

What has become of you now,  
oh minstrel of autumnal decay,  
your blackening shades of mind?  
And who'd leave this forlorn volume  
to languish amongst the chaff,  
*beside* a pile of business books  
so terribly out-of-date:  
advising us how to invest  
in a '90s economy,  
that a crash is on the horizon,  
that the Internet will never take off?

You'll live on my shelves beside Shelley,  
with the Brownings a few spots away,  
relieved of your discounted sticker  
which only embarrassed you  
even more,

like the school boy picked last in gym,  
or that girl with a lisp in your poem,  
the one you abandoned  
at the dance,  
in a heavily shadowed corner,  
watching the others clench and kiss,  
your cruellest dénouement.

### **Columbia, 33 1/3**

Yesterday I bought a record,  
the kind that's made from vinyl,  
this one being the old-fashioned,  
more durable variety,  
the no-longer-in-use 10-inch size,

and though I don't really know  
how old it is,  
it's old, much older than I am,  
and looks like it hasn't been played  
in half-a-century.

It's the *Sonata No. 3 in B minor*,  
*Opus 58*,  
by Chopin,  
played on the piano by Malcuzyński,  
who, like Madonna or Prince  
of the '80s,  
is a one-name wonder,  
this time the surname, I assume,  
being paramount, with the given one  
nowhere to be found;  
and though I know who Fredrik Chopin  
was, I have no idea who the hell  
Malcuzyński is, only that he's really good,  
and probably really dead.

But this isn't about the pianist  
or the composer,  
or the piano which never gets enough credit  
for the emotions it inspires,  
or even about the record  
though it claims, as most of them did  
way back when, that it's "non-breakable"  
(though I've no plans to put it to the test),  
and that it has a "silent surface" –  
which it may have had when it was new,  
but today, as I listen to it for the first time,  
it has more than its fair share of muffled  
scratches, which, yes, makes it all the more  
endearing.

What I'm thinking of instead of all of this,  
is how often this record was played,  
in the past, and by whom:  
if it was an old music professor  
filling his room with beautiful notes,  
as opposed to the rasps of his own breathing  
(that always amplify in loneliness),  
or maybe a '50s schoolgirl  
who rebelled against rock 'n' roll,  
was a misfit who dwelt in libraries  
but had a smile I would have swooned  
for,

or maybe both –  
the girl picking up the record  
at a used record shop,  
long after the professor had died,  
with no loved one to pass it on down to,  
both of them connected  
through the grooves that may have given them  
some solace on a Saturday night,  
when their peers were out there dancing,  
or under a flowered bed sheet somewhere  
having the kind of sex  
that Chopin may have alluded to in the finale,  
where Malcuzyński's fingers-pounding-keys  
speak of *climax* of another kind,  
that only the fortunate know.

## Ward One, Civic Election

You heard a knock  
upon the door;  
I begged you not to open

He's there, again, isn't he?  
The man from city hall,  
the one with leaflets,  
slogans, pitching us  
to vote

I point to the neighbour's  
house across the street.  
Needles on the  
lawn, a tricycle bent  
by a car,  
and unpaid bills that sail  
mid-air

*Catch one*, I dare to say,  
as you smile to him  
apologetically.  
*Take the place of*  
*children playing ball*

## September Dew

In the days of almost-autumn,  
the dew mimics frost  
with beads of light,  
water bouncing sunshine  
in a harbinger of white.

Frost is still at least  
a month away,  
on this morning  
in September, my garden  
losing green, the wane of  
fruitfulness.

I catch the yellow  
creeping up  
the veins of leaves,  
orange forming islands  
in a verdant span of sea,  
to grow in red and brown  
and be as continental  
mass,

like the spread of cancer cells  
that spell the ever-inevitable,  
that incision cannot stop,  
and the fall of what was once  
so beautiful.

Soon, even the birds  
will rise and flee –  
to warmer spheres  
that beckon.

If I were free  
as they,  
I'd depart as well,  
unable to bear the sight  
of no-more living.

But today, while I feel  
the summer's close,  
the clothes of clover's  
grass arrayed in wet,  
I'll harken  
in a heartbeat  
to the cardinal's  
snatch of worm,  
spy the struggle so in vain,  
the writhing giving way  
to limp and still,  
to the quiet come  
when something's been  
consumed.



## **An Ephemeral Affair**

On our final day together,  
my lover brings a blossom,  
a solitary bloom,  
says flowers are lost  
by the dozen,  
that the beauty  
at the top of a single stem  
explodes upon an iris,  
that an orb should not absorb  
a flood of fleeting,  
fragile colour.

I take my darling's gift  
and soak her mahogany hair  
with my eyes,  
grateful that I'll remember,  
be fond of the fronds  
we've felt, the pond  
by which we sat  
upon a wooden bench  
for two,  
pitching pennies  
for a wish,  
knowing nickels  
purchase more,  
are less toxic  
to the fish.

## **Come Winter**

*– for Carrie*

In the summer sun,  
the moth believes its beauty  
rivals the butterfly's.

In the summer sun,  
the plainness of white  
is vivid, gleaming;  
its diminutive wings  
casting a canopy's  
shade.

You are beautiful  
under the summer sun.  
Come winter,  
yours will be the effulgence  
outshining the snow,  
whose shadow is a swirl  
of turquoise, lilac,  
circles of garnet and gold.

## **Planting Roses on the Sabbath**

Yes, the searing sun  
scorched our backs in the sowing,  
the SPF 45 left inside,  
for on this day we thought of nothing else  
but the trellis, the vines that would ascend  
and the pink-to-red side of the spectrum  
that would indeed beautify  
the barren side of our yard.

On this, the eve of June,  
let us drink to a job well done,  
to our labour on the Sabbath,  
to our sin and all that will blossom  
by its stubborn, rebel hands.

For our palms and brows  
poured saline sweat and dreams,

and when we're grey,  
when we're bent but still in love,  
when our fingers are too gnarled  
to spade and to seed,  
we'll water gently,  
evade the stabbing of thorns,  
and number each bloom  
in honour of our crime  
and passion.

## **Carrot Tops of the World, Unite**

You are cast aside like weeds,  
twisted, ripped off orange heads  
without a pause or second thought,  
as rubbish to be bagged,  
composted at very best.

I will *not* be so cold  
and so cruel:

I will trim your green for garnish,  
with the finest of meals,  
on porcelain.

I will hang you on the wall  
in lieu of crosses,  
instead of icons of the saints.

I will put you in a vivid vase  
or re-plant beneath an elm,  
to find a character all your own,  
with neither fruit nor flower  
to be loved as much;

none to spurn  
your ragged crown as worthless –  
without resplendence, beauty,  
birds that praise above.

## **For Basho**

The frog that's in my garden  
is incredibly far from home.

This cannot be its abode  
since by its very amphibious  
nature it lives and moves –  
part-time – in water.

Yes, there are puddles filling  
holes along the dirt, in  
inconsistencies of deck  
and stepping stone –  
the coloured blocks that sag  
in certain places,  
in a way I cannot notice  
unless it rains.

There's a river to the east  
about a mile,  
30 light-years for a frog,  
with its inefficient hop,

and every taxing, sluggish jump  
preceding scheduled breaks  
to rest,

while predators await,  
the scores of running wheels  
ever-ready  
to squash it flat.

It pours in summer daybreak  
while I sleep,  
as I dream of downward  
spirals,  
of plunging from the sky  
and flapping arms  
in lieu of wings,

a frog beneath  
the beanstalk  
sponging water's  
soothing drops,

its wart-less head  
and back  
now beaded wet,

leaving nothing lost  
or wasted in the fall.

## Linus and Lucy

There's a girl around the corner  
taking lessons, on a piano,  
her bay-sized windows open,

with every missed-hit key  
made that much louder  
by Murphy's law—  
no muting  
of what normally  
muffles  
(at least if the music  
were good):

the choir of barking dogs,  
lawnmowers spitting grass,  
a freight train's ill-timed  
crossing.

If it could at least be  
something pleasant,  
some Grieg or Chopin  
prelude,  
the mistakes might somehow  
grate less  
in my mind,  
intermingled  
with moments of calm.

But Guaraldi's *Linus and Lucy*  
should never be butchered this way,  
the over and over  
rendering  
of what frequently speaks  
of failure,  
even when perfectly played:

that unrequited love,  
that poor ol' Charlie Brown,  
his dancing beagle's scorn,

is just too fast and tricky  
for this child's  
clumsy fingers,

strikes much too close to home  
for any neighbour  
who thought forgotten:

that desk without  
red hearts;  
a kite torn  
in a tree;  
a football held for kicking,  
the tears  
when snatched away.



**Filler:**

The album's seventh track,  
that isn't very good,  
that you find yourself  
skipping  
like the fourth, eleventh  
ones,

as though the artist  
couldn't conjure  
another hit,  
recorded  
lifeless strumming  
so the deadline could be met,  
the catchy songs adjacent  
caught in a buyer's  
shopping list –

and the book's insipid poems  
that plod along  
around the middle,  
where the poet doesn't have  
a thing to say,

as if the blather of the lines  
trumps the wordless white  
of page,

the flight of fleeting  
muse,

the emptiness of things  
on which to ponder.

## The Dwarf

Think of Rumpelstiltskin,  
childless, spinning gold  
for a promise, broken,

or an allergy-ridden servant  
of Snow White,  
known only by his malaise  
and not a name;

the Lilliputians, thwarted  
by a single Gulliver,

and that diminutive fish  
of the ocean,  
pining for a place in a pond.

And then there is *Pluto*,  
too far to be warmed  
by the sun,  
complaining it's the smallest  
*planet*,  
until even *that*  
is taken away,

the ninth and last in line,  
darling little *world* no more,

no longer *scanned* for  
in the skies,  
a speck or dot  
or lowly mote  
not *worth* the squint  
of eyes.

## Regarding the Pitfalls of Finer Dining

The zoologist  
you used to date  
turned you entirely off of men:

*The dung beetle  
is a survivor,*

*eating excrement  
for millions of years  
and never complaining  
about the taste.*

I admit my skills  
of conversing  
aren't *envied*  
by the erudite,  
but even I would find  
something better to discuss  
over string beans,  
seasoned shrimp:

*On the pathway  
in the woods  
behind my house,  
there's a bird's nest  
that's been empty  
since the days I was a child.*

It's a subtle invitation  
to an after-dinner stroll,  
a chance to burn some calories  
post-dessert,  
hoping I can *conjure*  
a funny joke  
along the way,  
something to make you giggle,

re-ignite your *faith*  
in fallen males,

watch for robins  
reclaiming roosts,

our eyes to the skies  
never shifting to the ground,  
where waste  
and crawling vermin  
coexist.

## Hispaniola

On the right side of the line  
he envisions  
greater things,  
his life as a baseball star,  
perhaps a house on the hill with a gate,  
looking down on all the tourists  
who are sunning themselves in the sand.

Left of the Dominican,  
in the searing Haitian heat,  
she cannot feel her feet,  
the fractured concrete ceiling  
breaking bones, chalking skin—  
a ghost before she is gone.

And from the hovel that was her home  
about a half a mile away,  
her aunt and brother calling  
from the land of the freshly crushed:  
*food and water coming* so they're told,  
coffins too, from the other side  
of the border,  
being built as fast as they can.

## **The Buddhist**

Your apartment smelled of sandalwood  
the day you went for refuge,  
submitted to the Sensei,  
cleared your mind of racing thoughts.

Your locks of hair, unshorn,  
no need to practice bald,  
no yellow robes or statues save the one  
of Gautama,  
in crimson soapstone, seated,  
a three-fold jewel to ponder.

Your candles will illumine  
midnight steps, bead-strung  
prayers,  
vespers from the mould  
of monastic  
chant,

so far from forest groves  
uncut by hand,  
your speech a distant cricket  
in the grass.



## Type Writer

Your words are never wrought  
by pen and hand,  
neither are they scribed  
on computer screens,  
but somewhere in-between,

on that Underwood  
from the '20s,  
from the days of silent film  
and prohibition,  
before the typing  
went electric,  
every *snapping* stroke of key  
a laboured struggle  
for your fingers,  
every letter  
birthed by grunted  
downward thrusts.

Your poems were never easy  
to understand,  
the obscurities from the Scotch  
and blurring sight,  
but at least I know their embryonic  
state,  
how they physically came to be,

that nothing in their telling  
was ever simple,  
convenience  
never worthy to consider,  
verses void of the calm  
of soundless things.

**No. 6, in C Major, with Voice**

I've opened a window  
to blend the outside  
with what is in,  
the strings of a concerto  
playing from my radio,  
accompanying a cardinal  
in its morning lilt.

When an adagio arrives,  
an oriole will add a vocal  
that the composer did not intend,  
unless it was of love  
the violinist lamented  
in the unspoken sweep  
of his bow.

### **This is the Reason**

I've never written you  
a love letter, as I did for the girls  
I crushed on in school,  
vowing a childish *forever love*.

I've been told that *both*  
can never truly be promised,  
there are too many variables  
upon which they can falter—

an unexpected loss  
of mind and memory,  
the foreboding phantom  
of infidelity,

that our lifespans  
are simply too long,  
the decay of what we were  
befalling while we breathe,

that the warbler outside my  
window, his years but a  
jaunt through junior high,  
says it better,

his skyward pledge  
to his treetop mate  
daily putting me to shame.

### 30 Years

If I were thirty years younger,  
I'd ask the woman at the bar  
why I hadn't seen her here before.

If I were thirty years younger,  
I'd write down my phone number  
and leave it next to her purse.

If I were thirty years younger  
I wouldn't leave this place alone,  
the girl beside my table  
would turn around and smile at me,  
instead of *past* me  
to some well-built, wavy-haired fellow  
who'd rushed for 90 yards in last week's  
homecoming game.

If I were thirty years younger,  
I wouldn't be jotting down lines  
about being thirty years younger,  
I'd be living as someone that age  
currently does – on some precipice,  
with no fear of falling off,  
having another round of drinks  
with my lively, spirited friends,

exchanging flirtatious glances  
with lovely young women  
who are not too young for me  
to respectfully eye  
without feeling like a dirty old man,

and certainly not  
carrying a notebook to a pub,  
scribbling thoughts  
that someone less than half my age  
wouldn't think to entertain,  
shamelessly calling it a poem.

## Watchful

—for a sculpture by Walter Allward

In the hours after dusk,  
we deduce he plots the *path*  
of distant suns, waits  
unabatedly  
for Antares to explode,  
its cradled remnants  
to feed five fetal stars,

or stares expectantly  
at the halved or crescent moon,  
hoping to behold  
a *crater's* new creation,  
amid the burst  
of meteor impact.

At the pinnacle of noon,  
we can't surmise the subject  
of his gaze, always skyward, note  
the sun should bring his eyes  
to squint and narrow, fancy  
if he's witnessed  
every shape and sort of creature  
in the clouds,

wonder if he's worried  
about *the big one*,  
the asteroid that's due  
to smite the Earth, if the flesh  
of what he emulates  
follows the fate  
of dinosaurs,

praying that some *God*  
will part his lips  
if he should spot it,  
beseech us both to kiss  
then run for cover.



## The Deck

You've been  
bluffing your way  
through our friend-  
ship, the wine you've  
swigged in fifteen minutes  
making its naked presence  
known,

that the joker  
is worth  
an even dozen,  
one-up on my  
ace of hearts,  
for he vows to  
make us laugh  
at this time of  
unspoken amour,

your royal flush  
in the house of cards  
we'll construct with  
trembling hands,

while love is concealed  
like the side of the moon  
that dares not show its face,

veiled in the  
kitchen window,  
withholding  
its fevered glow.

## Goderich

The stones amid the rocks  
form a pattern we promptly  
discern—*Inuksuk*, conveying  
human without a visage,  
from meticulous, Inuit hands:

a marker on a route,  
a site of veneration,  
a place to catch some fish  
when we are hungry.

This beach is crowded over every summer,  
and the stones are just as plentiful  
as the sand. Tomorrow, the Inuksuit  
may be many, the art of imitation,  
Caucasian appropriation,

or the *one* that's been here days?  
Dismantled, caught up in a wave  
whenever the gales are temperamental,

or the consequence of a child,  
ambling along the shore,  
seeking *ujarak* flat and smooth,  
for skipping on the rippled sheen,

who took to playing Jenga under the sun,  
wary over dislodging from the middle,  
the kerplunking of a game that went awry,  
one *set* of naked footprints  
fleeing trespass, its shame  
and culpability,

to be expunged upon remorse,  
the soddening of eyes,  
this water's absolution  
once the wind has finished its rage.

### **The Ellipsis . . .**

teases amid the white,  
leaving us to guess  
what's been omitted,  
cherry-  
picking its many biases,  
filtering out the  
disparaging in every  
book and movie review.

See it there, at the start  
of a neutered sentence,  
as though the initially  
penned words  
were never scribed,  
not critical enough to share,  
like lifting a stylus  
above the grooves,

lowering it precisely  
into the record  
after the opening verse  
has been sung,  
singling out the chorus  
as if that alone  
were more than enough.

I was recently told  
I was doing it wrong,  
failing to leave a space  
between this trinity  
of dots. *It takes up  
too much room*, I replied,  
*looks peculiar on the page.*

Do not leave me  
wondering what these lines  
conceivably said,  
in the heat  
of an angry moment,  
within the quote  
of a love confessed,

this trail that leaves  
the ending to conjecture,  
a search for the  
discarded  
we were never supposed to know.

## Seclusion

I have all the time  
in this pandemic world  
to create my *Magnificat*,  
the magnum opus  
to be said or sung  
for generations yet to come;

and with my calendar  
of vacant squares  
there is *no* excuse to delay,  
no obligation to grant me pardon.

They say Shakespeare  
had a similar quandary  
and he managed to pen *King Lear*—

no one to disturb or vex him  
while he dipped his feathered quill  
into the murk of bottled ink.

No pressure.  
And whether the tragedy to unfold  
is due to the love or  
due to the greed I cannot say,

for I too will need Five Acts,  
a post-curtain bow,

and I've still to build my stage  
of paper maché—

so do not let us flee our homes  
before this plague has ended.

Oh come, dear Cordelia,  
guide this blinded Gloucester  
to scribe *whatever* lines he must,  
give magnificence to a poem  
that will inspire—

both the feverish woman  
in the laboratory  
forging *on* to our salvation,

and to the man beneath the trees  
who sweats profusely,  
digging graves in case she fails.



## Lionel

lays down tracks  
like he did when he was a  
kid, predating *The Neighborhood  
of Make Believe*—  
he was already in college  
by then, getting A's and getting  
laid, evading the Draft  
till the excuses had run out,  
a frontline Private  
ducking marksmen from  
the Viet Cong,

returning with his leg  
blown off and his carob skin  
scarred by the relentless spray  
of shrapnel.

Today, both the medal  
he was given and the pin  
of *Old Glory* ride in the caboose,  
behind the load of Pennsylvanian  
coal that's terribly out-of-date,

as all of it is, really: the freight  
cars disappearing into a distant  
tunnel like a rodent's tail  
that darts into drywall,

a baseboard cavity never patched,  
puffing smoke as if a gambler  
sucking on a cigar smuggled in  
from Havana when the Cold  
War brought us all to our knees,  
shuddering under our desks  
though we had told ourselves  
fervently that this is just pretend.

## Paris

*This* one is not so Grand  
as its river, no Seine  
cutting at its heart  
or couples arm-in-arm  
amid *je t'aime*.

We can see  
the eroding townscape  
from this crowded  
rooftop bistro,  
and there's a soufflé  
on the menu you'd like to try,  
while I scan the varied wine list  
for *Château Valfontaine*.

We made a *hard*, last-minute  
turn off the 403, figured  
Brantford would be dull,  
there's only so much  
Bell and Gretzky  
we can digest, yet again.

And substituting for a tower?  
There's the truss bridge  
serving the railway  
that traverses the muddy banks,

its lattice now a respite  
for a dozen, migrating flocks,

and, upon which, the locals say,  
some have confessed their love;  
plunged down in *ultime liberté*.

## Aardvark

And there he is again,  
on the very first page of  
every Merriam-Webster,  
the top of the list of  
*Animalia*,  
the Everest of his kind;

*Aaron*, if he were human,  
dismissing as jealousy  
his rivals' cry of "cheat,"  
that the double A  
is so superfluous,  
he's *no* transistor battery  
or city on the Danish coast;

and if he could scream,  
a pirate's *aargh!*

as if on a ship of stolen  
gold, strutting haughtily, as though  
he'd a mane of the same colour,  
asking disdainfully, *just WHO*  
*is the King of beasts?*

## The Garage

You phoned on your way  
back home,  
saying there's a garage sale  
in the neighbourhood, asking  
if I'd like to join you.

*We have  
a garage already,  
I said, we don't need a second one  
(and besides, where could we possibly  
put it?).*

It's not an attempt  
at a tired quip, my dearest,  
like my reply to your  
previous request,  
the *go window shopping*  
*with me ...*

*Our windows are fine as they are,  
incompatible  
with your search  
for clothing,  
knowing that we'd gaze at  
mannequins,  
all in fancy attire, ones  
missing limbs and faces.*

And I could have said  
*you're beautiful*  
*just as you are,*  
without the need  
of pricey garments,  
that I adore you in sweatpants  
and tees,

but all I could think of  
were the forced-upon poses  
of the lifeless,  
how they can do nothing  
other than model,  
without eyes to see outside,  
though they're facing the bustling  
street,

and if there are more of them  
out there *naked*,  
in some stranger's creepy garage,  
awaiting  
the inevitable day  
they'll join a tea set  
missing a saucer,  
a chess set minus a queen,

a tricycle robbed of its bell  
and a teddy bear bereft  
of stuffing,

on a lawn with passers-by,

couples  
looking for anything  
to distract,  
from their silly,  
daily quarrels,  
from their lack of meaningful sex,

all of them hunting for bargains  
amid the cracked  
and the once-beloved.



## **Gale from the North**

*– for Carrie*

This wind wielding its vigour  
brings a reminiscence:  
your face buried in my shoulder  
as I stroke the back of your hair,  
saying all will be alright  
and that storms are needed  
to recycle the air,  
to cleanse our skies and valleys  
and are a prelude to something  
better, like a kiss that says  
how much you're adored,  
that all will be calm  
by the time I let you go.

## A Muse

You noticed my proclivity  
for the overly sentimental,  
the *Romeo and Juliet*,  
the hours I spent re-reading,  
my watching of *The Notebook*  
with a pad and pen in hand,

the *Mantovani*  
taking turns  
with *Manilow*,

all for inspiration,  
that poem about our passion,

your sulking  
a display for this affront,

as though your stale,  
chaste kisses  
were not enough.

## Sorrow

lowers its head  
like a contrite,  
a collector of tax and interest  
at the back of the Temple of God,  
a deflowered droop in humidity,  
a humbled *curve* at the top of a cane,  
knowing not what the sky is doing  
but cognizant instead  
of the number of ants and crickets  
crawling *beneath* its chafed feet –  
one to offer its serenade to the night,  
the other soon to rest after a *day*  
of repetitive toil, too weary to dwell  
on what happiness could possibly be.

## After the Melt

Every *leafless* tree in the valley  
is lifting its hands in praise –

true, they're always *raised*  
in exaltation  
but today they are especially grateful  
to a sun that's freed their arms,

taken their *knotty*, spindly fingers  
and relieved them of the ice –

the glossy, glassy coating  
that had frightened off the finch,  
shooed away the owl,  
brought their boughs to *bend*  
from limpid weight;

yet if there'd been a giant mirror  
in which they'd seen their own reflection,  
they may have viewed a splendour  
that's unmatched, even by the Autumn's  
red-and-golds,

and, albeit for an hour,  
when they'd never been so alluring,  
every bird on its makeshift perch  
chanting homage from a distance.

## Hermitage

This Fall, I didn't leave the house at all.

I spent the Autumnal Equinox  
at one of those grocery-plus-  
everything-else-you'd-ever-need  
kind of stores,  
overflowed my pantry with the canned  
and the dried, the toiletries good till Spring,  
then waited out the shortening of days,  
spied the apple-coloured leaves  
and their falling yellow brethren  
from the safety of my window,  
barely a crack in its anti-social drapes.

I kept abreast of the world  
the old-fashioned way, with my radio,  
had the mail dropped into a newly-  
carved slot in the door  
and then imagined  
what the neighbours thought  
when a lucky midnight wind  
blew my leaves all down the street,  
if I'd raked them under the dark  
of a new moon,  
my form as black as shadow,  
waving to an insomniac  
out for a jog,

or bagging them before my ride  
to a possible graveyard shift,  
where a skeleton crew of workers  
wonder if anyone out there misses them,  
when the sun arises to light  
the once-hidden bones of trees.

## Haight-Ashbury

The temperature in our apartment  
is always moderate,  
20 Celsius, or as our friends in  
San Francisco call it, 68, never too frigid,  
too torrid, as pleasant as its people  
who birthed a twentieth-  
century love of gay and poetry,  
where Ginsberg howled  
and Ferlinghetti keeps the city  
lights plugged in,  
grateful for their dead, their '67  
just a narrow notch  
before some elusive ideal  
that hovers within our reach.

You tell me to never touch  
the thermostat and I acquiesce.  
What we call *warmth* is but the middle,  
the centre of some utopia  
absent of fire and of ice.

Yes, the ground there occasionally  
quakes, much like our walls and  
ceiling do whenever the tenants  
upstairs argue about the bills  
or break into a dance  
we've been curious to behold.

### **The Way in Which I Prefer My Demise:**

by drowning in the Pacific,  
not because it's pleasant,  
(like dying in my sleep  
during some subconscious,  
midnight reverie),  
this under-the-surface  
suffocation,

but for the reason that  
if I ever did come back,  
as the Buddhists and  
Hindus say I will,  
I'd want to live in the sea,  
its relative calm and serenity,  
its teal and aquamarine,  
with humans seldom to be seen,  
my hands but fins  
and a caudal for feet,

and death, should it come calling  
once again, taking merely as long  
as the cavernous gulp  
from the whale's insatiable hunger.



## Having a Cigarette with Daphne du Maurier

The ashtray in the drawing room  
brims with stubs, and that  
which mirrors soot,  
and I cannot say I blame you  
as your match ignites my vice,  
setting it aglow  
like a hearth-side midnight ember,  
all but extinguished,

and you're telling me of  
shrines and hidden places,  
all within this house—*mansion*, I call it,  
speaking as an apartment-dweller,  
and I hope you understand,  
that Mrs. de Winter  
spent many a time  
in hotels, yearning for space  
before realizing that  
too much under a creaky roof  
gives rise to conjured spectres,  
*encircling* our throbbing skulls  
like the smoky rings  
that surround us;

that there's a Mrs. Danvers  
lurking about every corner,

the shadows of whom  
take shape upon the walls,  
like a flame that licks the  
paint in feigned innocence,  
tickling before it consumes.

Like me, your narrator  
isn't *worthy* of a Christian  
name, that we're unable to  
live up to our *Rebeccas*,

that Manderley, as an  
incinerated shell,  
with its wild, snaking foliage  
creeping *out* of glassless windows,  
stands *victorious* in its rubble—

to those of us who see  
what burns  
as not a hellish vision,  
but a preface to paradise,

where all of us are called  
within the fire,  
by a voice which only  
we sinners understand.

## The Difference a Single Minute Can Make

I'm finding myself  
forever late  
and running a frantic catch-up  
to every place  
I need to be:

The city bus *bolting*  
as I stretch my waving arms  
to flag it down;

the opening credits rolling  
as I scramble for my seat,  
popcorn spilling  
from its bag;

missing the woman I would have met –  
and *married* –  
had I seen her seconds sooner,  
*before* a line of people  
blocked our path,  
leaving us as strangers,  
our eyes to never lock.

I lost out  
on a stellar career  
because I didn't see the want ad  
in the paper –

the listing stamped for me  
under the arm  
of another seeker,  
who snagged  
the final copy  
of the city's daily news  
just a breath-and-a-half before.

I want to ask my mother  
why she couldn't birth me faster,  
why she hadn't *heeded* the contractions  
just as soon as they were felt,  
without delay,

pushed an extra bit harder  
while my head was popping out,

that additional minute of life,  
that little head start,  
giving me adequate time to stroll  
to that bus stop down the street,  
smell some flowers along the way,  
tell a woman I think she's pretty,

if we can meet for a funny movie  
when my day at the office is done.

## Percussion

It was one of your friskier nights  
and you suggested "strip poker."  
*I don't know how to play poker,*  
I lethargically said, with no desire  
to either strip or deal cards.

Your temperature rose,  
in a flash and in a flush,  
and you put some rumba on,  
whipped off your blouse and bra,  
and shook yourself silly  
while I flipped through  
the *Business Weekly*,  
lifting my eyes when the congas  
kicked in and when the columnist  
talked of tax.

## Tigris and Euphrates

Shelly says if she were God  
or last upon the earth,  
not another soul behind,  
she'd start it all again:

Breathing life in crackled sand,  
forming mouth and nose and eyes.  
Not "Adam" this time  
but "Ben."  
Her father would be kinder  
and neither Fall  
nor bear a Cain.

*When he took you to the fair,  
he did whatever you asked,  
didn't he?*

You nod and point to clouds:  
cotton candy by the mile,  
a smiling sky  
that never yells.

## Aurora Borealis

In the north, at this peculiar season,  
at this time of cricket-night,  
we'll see aurora borealis,  
the waves of greenish light  
on grand horizons.

I think of stately trees,  
if *arboreal* pertains to Heaven  
and you tell me that it doesn't,  
that it's terrestrial,  
that the trunks and spindly branches,  
with leaves that fill each top  
as *diadems*,  
are simple, silent observers  
of the celestial show above.

I mention *holidays*,  
the one we're currently on,  
if the calendar takes note  
of the kaleidoscope ahead  
and again I'm deemed confused,  
that the planting of oaks and elms  
has *nothing* to do with the stars,  
that *Arbor Day* is christened  
with a shovel and a spade.

A final, blazoned variant comes to mind:

*Aurora*, with radiant, emerald eyes,  
a daughter's perfect name,  
one that we'll hold onto for the future,  
as a *tribute* to the swirls  
of cosmic glow,  
ones that dance aloft,  
soundless and angelic.



## Vodka Bill

takes to the bottle  
as soon as he's through the door.

But this isn't one of those distressing  
alcoholic poems.

Bill can hold his liquor,  
is rarely reeling drunk  
and his liver functions fine.  
He has no wife or kids to beat  
but would never do that anyway.

You see, it's just something he does,  
two-thirds vodka, one-third  
orange juice and lime.  
Forget his vows to move away  
and find someone who loves him;  
move away to that grander job  
eluding him to this day.

There's nothing wrong  
with Walmart blue, living  
alone in his squalid apartment,  
practicing *hello* and *how are you?*  
and *can I help you find anything?*  
and maybe he simply likes the taste  
and wouldn't have it  
any other way

and it's not so bad for  
*do you love me?*  
to go unanswered  
in his dreams  
and in the shoe department,

runners to the right,  
slippers to the left.

## Rx

The pharmacist I talk to  
totally gets my problem.  
I show her my prescription  
for *Joyfullix*, a new pill  
to make you feel happy  
and she gives me *beta-anaporiliovium*,  
its cheaper generic cousin that's  
the exact same thing except  
for the impossible-to-memorize  
multi-syllabic name.

To curb the pendulum of my  
mood swings, the *Abilify*  
my psych recommended  
comes to me as *apo-aripiprazole*, 5mg,  
to soon be doubled to 10.

Does this mean it will again be  
rechristened? Will *cazolipiumestroniasin*  
work just as well? If I show up at the  
desk, will my pharmacist simply shrug,  
tell me to close my eyes  
and imagine the best, the cure  
within me already, in the fantasy  
that every drug is a miracle,  
hot off the goddamn line?

## Eggs

Omelettes were our breakfast  
in the days before we bickered,  
peppers and parsley pressed  
amid the shredded mushroom bits—  
*served* on gilded plates as gold as sun.

It's 8:13am, and the eggs  
you pitched in the pot  
have started to crack  
and leak a mess.

If I'd been  
a few steps quicker,  
didn't dilly-dally,  
made it to the kitchen just before  
your stomps and slams,  
*I'd* have placed them gently  
in the cool of filtered water,  
*set* the aging stove  
at medium-low,  
brought them to a boil,  
peacefully,

allowed our yolks  
to stay intact,

leave this one last thing  
unbroken.

## Lady Agatha

The neighbour next door has no clothes on,  
is 83 and creased like a raisin.

There are curtains in her house,  
sun-faded,  
once-gold, now yellow,  
and always left open, day or night;  
and at night, with every light in her home  
ablaze,  
she shuffles about from room to room,  
hoping the curious are watching.

I *can't* confirm my theories,  
say *why* she does what she does,  
but outstretched drapes  
like the yawn of a cat  
will be  
my damning witness.

I sometimes wonder  
what she was like  
before the age  
and fat set in,  
before cellulite took its toll  
and silky skin began to sag –  
supple and svelte and 20-something, yes;

frolicking out the front door, perhaps,  
as an unabashed doe  
and skipping around  
her garden,  
where, if I'd been around back then,  
I *could* have made  
her acquaintance,  
impressed her  
with my ability  
to maintain eye contact,  
merely blush  
at her bouncing breasts.

As it is, I have *no intent*  
on paying a call,  
walking her barking dog  
I only hear,  
extending an empty cup  
in need of sugar,  
resisting the urge  
to search and scan  
for *the beautiful*,  
long-since lost.

## Knick-Knack

The schnauzer figurine I gave you  
was dismissed as a *knick-knack*,  
a worthless ornament,  
unable to bestow its  
love, wag its tail, or beg for a walk  
around the block.

*You'll never have to clean up  
after it*, I said, knowing that  
"poop 'n' scoop" was outside  
your realm of comfort, that it would  
never shed its coat or  
grind your brand-new slippers  
with its teeth.

*I had a real-life version of it  
once*, I confess, revealing  
the reason for this ceramic imitation,  
*rubbed its head against my shins  
even when it wanted nothing from me  
at all.*

## Laugh Track

I'd like to *erase*  
all the people  
on the laugh track,

their giggles in a sitcom,  
manufactured  
and rehearsed.

I doubt they even *see* the shows  
through which they're feigning chuckles,  
and if in fact they do,  
with *signs* that prompt them when  
and how to chortle,  
then shame on them, I say,  
allow a karma's curse  
to bite their asses –

for let them sit through circus clowns  
and be as mute as mimes,

have them weep in hankies  
at the dimwit's bumbling fall,

and may it be a Requiem  
when pies are plunged in faces,  
the *Adagio for Strings*  
a serenade  
for splitting pants.



## The Drought

We are dry  
as cacti,

cracks in our lips  
from Gobi winds

and blinking eyes  
blinded by the grains  
of aches and pains.

There's been  
no rain  
in years,

our once-supple,  
braided flesh

long-since parted  
by grey and age –

its canes, its creases,

its mantra that  
*we're tired, so very,*  
*very tired;*

dreaming that there's  
water stored  
within our lower  
trunks,

enough to hope  
the next time  
moonlight falls,

a coyote's  
midnight call  
will cause our needles  
to conjoin –

moistened, pliant,  
tender to the touch.

## Silence

If small talk's  
about the weather,  
the shine and rain  
of days,

then ours is microscopic,  
a blip in the barely heard.

*Salt, where's  
the salt?*

*and It's there  
beside the milk*

with not a word  
about its ills  
or that it's really  
bad for me,

my arrhythmia,  
my blood pressure  
gone berserk,

that makes me *yearn*  
for morning nags  
that *drown* the sounds  
of chewing.

## The Vortex

I swear our *dryer*  
is a portal  
to an unseen *universe*—

and yes, I'm  
cognizant  
of the millions  
who've *also* made this  
claim, about their clunky,  
thieving Whirlpool,

that it feasts  
on single socks,  
pushing them *through*  
the threshold,  
before accruing  
the smallest hole,  
for the simple  
pleasure to vex;

that there's no hint  
of originality  
in this riddle,  
that the Tardis  
of Dr. Who  
has heard it all.

But let's take a  
*naked* step,  
into the abyss  
of polyester,

of cotton that's been  
plucked, of a *wool*  
the sign of a  
shepherd,

wonder if they ever  
commiserate,  
are missing their life-long  
mates, complain the  
*Rapture's* gone awry—

where the *one* of  
two is chosen,  
the other left  
behind,

and see which of them  
is worthy, for the  
nail-scarred foot  
of Christ,

or maybe  
it's the *fairy*  
tale before us  
all this time,  
fitting like a glove,

that it will take  
a cosmic eon  
to resolve,  
a line-up of a trillion,

each one  
trying to slide into  
the slipper of  
*Cinderella*,

stretching to  
enshroud her  
lovely toes.

## **I Surely Would Have Fallen Had I Tried**

*Thus God made the firmament,  
and divided the waters  
which were under the firmament  
from the waters which were above  
the firmament; and it was so.*

—Genesis 1:7

As a boy,  
the sky was the ocean;  
its islands, wisps of white.

We lived landlocked,  
never to see the sea,  
and streaking jets  
were distant boats  
that sliced  
the tranquil deep.

I was drawn  
to all things tall:  
telephone  
poles, chapel  
spires,

and the backyard tree  
that seemed to grow  
a little every year,

in increments  
scarcely noticed,

beckoning  
that I climb  
to cambric clouds,

with its branches  
brawny-firm,

while the shifting blues  
of lakes  
beyond its soaring  
broccoli crown  
had summoned me  
as well:

*Leap! Splash! Swim!*  
*The water, child,*  
*is fine.*



## Slavic

The couple behind me at this outdoor café  
speak in a language I strain to distinguish –

perhaps it's Czech or maybe Polish,  
their inflections rising and falling  
like the scales from an innovative pianist,

or it's possibly the Ukrainian  
I think I recognize  
after surmising I've heard "varenyky";

and I imagine the man is telling the woman  
that despite the many trials of his day,  
he is lucky and blessed to have her,

that when his boss yelled at him earlier  
he thought only of stopping at the florist  
on the way here to meet her,  
hence the arrangement on their table  
is *his* doing,  
not the proprietor's,

that even though  
all the other tables in this place  
are crowned with pink and red zinnias  
and the varied shades of phlox,

this was merely a case of the waiter  
having mimicked what he'd seen  
when this Slavic-speaking pair  
were the only ones here,

before myself  
and the other patrons arrived,

talking to each other in a tongue  
that kept no one guessing what was said  
as the late-day sun began its daily descent  
behind the jagged skyline in the distance.

## Poetasters

I've been told to never use *heart*  
in a poem.

It's worn, archaic, schmaltzy—  
used by all the *doggerelists*  
this workshop leader  
has warned us about.

It's right up there with *soul, love, yearning*.

*If it's in the poem you're working on,*  
she begins to thunder, *cut it out!*—  
using the image of a paring knife  
which *seems* a tad cliché  
(if I do say so myself),  
wondering how much rent she pays  
atop Mount Hypocrite.

I check her *curriculum vitae*  
at the break—  
stealthily, like a covert anti-lyrist  
*attempting* infiltration,  
masking the use of my smartphone  
as if I'm an iambic James Bond,

praying she *doesn't* suspect a thing  
while the others are out for coffee,

a smoke, obvious signs of stress  
while interacting with a demi-  
god: one who judges, demeans  
your silly muse, encourages your  
toil at a day job that's been dull,  
monotonous, sucks your *spirit*  
to the bone.

She's also wise to the way  
we would-be bards cloak *banality*,  
catches my synonym for my *psyche*  
masquerading as my *soul*—  
which, by the way, is counting down  
the hours till this hellish experience  
is done, wondering if I can duck  
out for an afternoon *root canal*.

When we finally reconvene, she rails  
against the *light*, how every single poet  
and their grandmother's fucking dog  
keeps spouting its tired truth,  
and if she hears the word *shard*  
just one more time,  
she'll break the user's neck  
like it's a fragment of fragile glass.

I wonder who it *was* that broke her heart  
(sorry, I mean *vascular organ*);

if she's ever been kissed  
under the shine of a faithful moon;  
if she'd know what it's like to have  
a mother die in her arms when she's only  
seventeen, and a father who'd fled at five.

At the close, I'm the first to offer what's  
written, wanting to get it over with,  
my teeth chattering like a typewriter  
on speed, my hands quaking  
as if *all* the tectonic plates  
were having sex,

the birdie in my treetop  
*fleeing* at that moment—  
terrified, vaporous, out an open window  
with several cracks all down the middle,  
believing it was to break  
into a million little pieces,

unable to reflect  
a summer sun  
that's no longer welcome here.

## Multitasking

You come home smelling  
of Export A, saying you've had a  
stressful week, had a  
cigarette in the car  
as you sped along the streets,  
getting nothing but lucky greens.

When I play the role of  
skeptic, asking *how*  
you lit a smoke,  
kept your hands  
upon the wheel, watched out  
for errant kids,  
you say you can walk  
and chew gum  
at the same time.

I've *never* seen you do it,  
that the *last* time you had  
a pink Bazooka

it was stale, bereft of all its  
flavour, that the comic strip enclosed  
wasn't funny—that Joe  
had jumped the shark,

that I'd kept it in my pocket  
half-a-year,

that you were *sitting*  
on the couch, viewing *Days*  
*of Our Fucking Lives*.

I've watched you mop the  
floors, bulky headphones  
on, dancing to Bruno Mars  
like a sotted college frosh;

and the time you did the dishes,  
reciting all your lines,  
from the play that was up-  
coming, effervescent  
suds upon your nose,  
upstaging the final act.

I knew a postman  
who chomped his Wrigley's  
every morning on his route, said  
a barking cocker spaniel  
had induced a sudden gulp,  
that he swallowed as he tripped,  
just minutes before his lunch;

that his *appetite* was lost,  
that the gooey thing  
fermented in his gut,

that sweet & sassy cherry  
had lingered on his tongue,  
that it lasted thirty days;

that he kept  
his wife *awake*  
throughout the night,  
that it somehow worked its way  
back up his throat, reviving  
a vexing habit as he slept:

the grating smack of chewing,  
the breath of exhalation,  
the pop from blowing bubbles  
in his dreams.



## Rodentia

My landlady is ranting  
about the squirrels,  
how they dig up all her flowers,

calling them *tree rats*,

that all of us would hate them  
if it weren't for their tails,  
how bushy they are,

their skill at being cute,  
adorable, the *way*  
in which they nibble.

I try to give them credit:  
that they don't crawl  
out from the sewers,  
pillage our provisions,  
leave dark *droppings* on our floor.

*Name a plague traced back  
to squirrels,  
the time they carried fleas,*

*stowed away  
on Spanish galleons,  
kindled contamination.*

In addendum  
I mention *Willard*,

its sequel in '72,  
remind that *Ben* goes hand-in-hand  
with Michael Jackson, whose life  
was a horror all its own.

Yet I still admit defeat,  
that no one's ever  
crooned to a bounding  
squirrel,  
that it would never  
top the charts,  
be in a position  
to redeem,

rain disdain  
on those below  
who curse its splendour.

## Dedication

We've noted that the  
crossing guard on the corner  
has *never* left his station,  
when the school a block away  
is brimmed with kids.

Every time we're peeking through  
a crevice in the blinds, go for *walks*  
around the crescent

there he is—that he's adopted  
the mailman's creed, that rain  
or snow or heat or gloom  
won't make a bloody difference,  
that he's never missed a day  
in thirty years, ducked *out*  
for a cup of coffee, ran back  
to his abode for an untimely  
bathroom break.

What everyone *admired*  
morphed to being  
weirded out, seeing him there  
on Saturdays,  
even Sundays—  
when there isn't a soul in sight.

You've heard a story from our  
neighbour, that he was half-a-minute  
late, one misty Monday morning  
back in 1993,

that a boy had tried to beat  
the flashing light,  
that he was struck  
by a turning car, that when the  
rookie guard arrived—  
panting, breathless,  
aching from a frantic  
sprint, the boy was spurting blood,  
that the driver just took off,  
that the moment the medics  
showed, he was dead, held  
in the arms of his sentinel  
too numb to shed a tear,

that the family never sued,  
the hit-and-runner  
never caught,  
that he wasn't *fired*  
from his job.

There's also those who've spied him  
in a glowing, orange vest,

in the midst of midnight fog—  
vigilant, alert,  
standing *still* at his usual  
spot, stop sign at the ready,

*looking* left and right as though  
a child needs to cross—

a belated *ghost*, perhaps,  
worried Mrs. Henderson  
will keep him after class,  
call his drunken mother saying  
this was the final straw.

## Meter Maid

*Lovely Rita, meter maid,  
nothing can come between us*

—The Beatles

The parking meter has ripped me off  
again. Granted, a quarter doesn't buy a lot  
these days, 12 minutes  
in the crumbling core,  
and there's little I could have done  
in that paltry span:

watch a person score some meth, perhaps,  
or a behemoth lumber towards me  
with his biceps freshly inked;

or maybe spy the hoodied teen  
in front of the *Cash and Dash*,  
with all of the windfall  
from a senior's cheque.

Shaking this rusty contraption  
accomplishes nothing—neither does  
thrashing the part that promises  
each Sunday will be free—  
which does me no *good*  
on this middle-of-the-week  
kind of moment.

I'm *yearning* for the world  
that's gone *away*, in which Petula  
Clark had sung to go *Down-*  
*town*;

storefront *windows*  
filled with stock,  
the bustle of suits and dresses,  
a cop directing traffic,  
with seldom a skateboard seen.

I would have waited  
for *Lovely Rita*  
to arrive,  
the heat from her sultry sway,

her expunging this metal rogue  
of the piece of *change*  
it stole from me,

saying it *buys* a leisurely stroll,  
a chance to see the sun  
ascend its zenith,

with plenty of time for coffee  
at the shop around the corner,  
or maybe *lunch* and herbal tea,

that she'll join me  
once she's dispensed with  
all her tickets.



## Milestones

I missed my car's odometer  
hitting the 100,000 mark,  
despite my awareness  
it was coming, that at 99,999  
it was just a quick *jaunt*  
to the grocer's,

that I'd happily watch it roll,  
purchase a bottle of champagne,  
toast my Chevrolet's achievement.

But then I got distracted by  
a woman and her dog,  
how sexy she looked  
as she walked, wondering  
if she was single,  
if the calico kept her up  
with its incessant, midnight  
bark.

By the time I remembered to  
check, the number read  
100,001

and I cursed that damned diversion,

that it could take me *years*  
to reach two hundred  
thousand Ks,

that I'd have to drive  
across the continent, say to hell  
with the price of gas,

that my eyes will lock obsessively  
on the dashboard,  
in the hours I'm getting close,

that I'll disregard the safety  
of other drivers, pedestrians,  
the moment I'm *within*  
the final roll, creeping at  
a turtle's vexing pace  
in NYC,

*ignoring* the crown of the Chrysler,  
its delightful Art Deco,  
the look of Lady Liberty  
from the road along  
the Hudson,

or if you find me in LA, that  
*Hollywood* will fail  
to get a glance,

that I'll never know how *right*  
the Beach Boys were,

about *California Girls*,  
not daring to peek at their legs,  
the swaying of their hips,  
lest a second landmark moment  
fall to waste,

and I'm mapping out another  
winding trek,  
through the blandest fields  
imagined,

only risking that a *scarecrow*  
or a farmer's lovely daughter  
will snatch my gaze.

## Algorithms

After thirty years of struggle,  
I've penned my *masterpiece*.  
It's the poem I can gloat is *perfect*:  
funny, heart-wrenching, born of  
blood and sweat  
with not a hackneyed phrase  
to be found.

I call it my magnum opus,  
think I've *reached* top-  
echelon, that I'll have to  
conjure up a way to make my  
humble brag sincere.

It's flawless in its cadence,  
accent after accent,  
but to attract the *avant-garde*,  
I've thrown in extra lines  
that            look  
              look            I  
                              o  
                              o  
                              k  
like  
                              this

knowing it's *innovative*,

that if *everyone's* being innovative  
it's still called innovative,  
and to fail to see my *genius*  
means you're clearly just jejune.

I *refuse* to send it to a journal  
unless they publish it *right away*,  
allow me to pick the font  
and put my face upon the cover—  
*filtered*, the one that sweeps the  
crow's feet from my eyes,  
masks the freckles that haven't faded,  
turns my grey to lightning blond.

I post it in a *hurry* to my accounts,  
wish the Facebook, Twitter crowds  
could have *seen* it in the making,  
like watching *Rodin* sculpt his *Thinker*,

that I should have up-  
loaded the entire process,  
let them see the brandy  
that I guzzled,  
as if I were drinking  
Dylan Thomas under the table.

After half-an-hour, I wonder

why it's still without a *like*,  
that it probably isn't showing  
in the *feed*,  
that it's all a conspiracy,  
between Musk and Zuckerberg,  
that what Penelope put  
on her fucking toast  
is considered more important;

that they're the lowest, common  
denominator, the *plebeians*, who  
wouldn't know a chef-d'œuvre  
if they stopped and *sat* on it;

that all the other poets are simply  
*jealous*, afraid I'll show them up,  
that they'll look like grade-school  
jinglers compared to me,  
that I'll crash their open mic,  
say to *hell* with allotted time;

that *Auden* is put to shame,  
that I've trumped his *Icarus*,  
that no one will give a shit  
about his wings from here on in;

that the ship will thumb its nose  
instead of sailing calmly on.

## Methocarbamol, 1500mg

I'm unable to open  
my tiny bottle of pills.  
No matter the effort,  
the creases of *strain* upon my face  
and its fervent flush of red,

no matter how forcibly  
I *push* the cap down, twist it to the side  
as instructed, it simply won't release  
its chalky stash.

There is *tamper proof*, *child proof*,  
and then there's *paranoid*—  
that a *psychopath* might taint  
this guarded cache, laugh  
in his mother's basement as I gag  
on *arsenic*, wishing me well  
in hell.

I picture Sisyphus on steroids,  
his inability to *budge* a puny pill,  
its supposed stoney ascent,

and the child of the Hulk  
and Hercules, teeth clenched in frenzy,  
veins *popping* under the skin  
of his brawny arms,

as this vessel begins to *mock*  
with its modest plastic,  
its illusion of simplicity,  
that a little old lady from church  
sprung these oblong captives free;  
that he was cocky, overconfident,  
that he'd finally met his match.

Oh, did I tell you? The meds are *muscle*  
*relaxants*, designed to loosen the grip upon  
my back; that I am powerless to *bend*,  
touch my toes; that a game of *Twister*  
is out of the question;  
that I'm even going *barefoot*  
since it's *impossible* to pull up my socks;

that this agony of exertion  
*exasperates* my condition,  
is another prime example of the  
cure being *worse* than the disease,  
one it swore would be vanquished,  
with an eight-ounce glass of water  
filled with ease from the kitchen sink.



## Ablutions

We're cleansed, supposedly,  
by this *priest* who signs the  
cross of Christ's forgiveness  
in the air, the beating upon  
our breasts

*replaced* by our relief, that we've  
dodged the flaming bullet,  
an eternal state that burns  
with our regret.

*What will Heaven be like?*  
our fledgling niece  
inquires, on her day  
of confirmation.

As godparents,  
we tempt with *clouds*  
of cotton candy,  
the honeyed *mists*  
of the beloved  
we said goodbye to  
long ago,

the myths of endless cake and  
chocolate rivers,

that she in her diabetic  
state  
has yet to savour,

that every sugared thing  
of taste and sight  
will *enthrall* in  
perpetuity,

her angelic ears  
deaf  
to the gnashing  
from the damned  
who missed the cut,

the shrieks subdued  
by choirs  
singing their sweet,  
incessant praise.

## Wild Bill McKeen

This village  
through which we're  
driving is home  
to "Wild Bill McKeen"

and though we haven't  
a clue who he is—  
or was—  
his name is on  
a banner in the air,  
tied to a pair of  
streetlights  
to make certain  
we'll never miss it.

The posted limit  
of speed is only  
30, and there's  
not a lot to look at  
so we defer to  
our conjectures  
as we crawl—

surmise  
he's a hockey  
player, spent his time  
in the penalty box,

a master of slash  
and slew foot,  
told the refs to  
go fuck off,  
took a piss  
on the Lady Byng.

We then travel  
back in time,  
think he may have  
robbed a coach,  
rustled cattle,  
outdrew the county  
sheriff after starting  
a barroom brawl.

We think of synonyms  
for *wild*,  
saying his hair was  
endless, unruly,  
he'd grown a beard  
from chin to foot,  
grunted like an ape,  
clutching a raw steak  
with savage hands—  
tearing off the  
pieces with his teeth.

In minutes  
we're back  
in the country, racing  
past the farms  
and grazing horses,  
say his rep  
was overblown,

mere hyperbole,

from the folks  
who've led some  
pretty boring lives,

that Wild Bill McKeen  
took his steaming  
cup of coffee  
without cream,

once jaywalked  
across the road  
while it was raining,

returning a *book*  
overdue  
by a day,

never guessing  
he'd be immortal  
on a sign,

or better yet—  
in a poem,

by someone too lazy  
to google  
his claim to fame.

## Ratios

There are 20 quadrillion  
ants upon the Earth,  
at least that's what the experts  
gauge, and there's two-and-a-half  
million for every human.

I don't find that comforting,  
that there's fifteen fucking zeroes  
after twenty,  
that I'm somehow  
responsible  
for 2,500,000 ants,  
feel unsure of what to do  
with that amount,

and if my neighbour were to die,  
do I care for twice as much?

*Ants can look after themselves,*  
you remind me, speaking of their  
diligence, the way they stick together,  
that their antennae relay messages  
much faster than our texts,  
adding they could conquer us  
anytime, if they really wanted to,  
from their colonies around the house,

that they're content  
to simply go about their business,  
hard-working communists  
that they are.

I feel the need to get away,  
where I'd forget about the ants,  
do some tourist kind of things,  
take in New York City in the fall,  
breathe the *crisp* of Brooklyn air,  
find all of the varied spots  
where *Seinfeld* had been set.

Seated behind your laptop,  
you declare there's over  
two million rats in NYC,  
that it's not as bad as it sounds,  
say there's *four* of us  
for every *one* of them,

that we could saunter  
through Central Park,  
extol the spectrum  
of the leaves,  
*catch* some vintage jazz  
in Greenwich Village,



while we wonder if these  
vermin know the ratio,  
that it actually falls  
within our favour,  
every time they migrate from  
the sewers, join us on the subway,  
risk our baited traps,

if that bite of smelly pizza's  
really worth it,  
for them, for us,  
and the anxious Italian baker,

who never checks what's crawling  
around his feet.

## Horticulture

I *murder* every houseplant  
that I purchase.  
Not deliberately, of course,  
like some serial killer  
in search of stalks and leaves,  
but an accidental agent  
of their demise,  
thus *involuntary*  
*plantslaughter*  
is more befitting.

My weapon of choice  
is water, that there's a  
fine line between  
just enough and far too much,  
a single drop the difference.

And I wish the ivy and the ferns  
could somehow speak,  
tell me *this is great*  
and *no more please*,

with *a few more inches*  
*to the left*  
guiding their placements  
by the light,

that they could tell me  
what kind of songs  
they like to hear,  
that maybe Mötley Crüe  
ain't the greatest choice.

My *green* thumb has become  
a midnight *black*;  
I should get  
another hobby,  
one that doesn't end in  
*genocide*.

I envision my arrival  
at the greenhouse,  
just beyond  
the city limits,  
the flora *cringing*  
at the sight  
of my shopping cart,  
knowing I've come  
for their generation,  
that they might as well  
start climbing  
out of their pots,

throw themselves to the  
floor, to be swept away  
and bagged,

*aware* their odds are better  
in the compost,  
when the sun  
crashes through  
organic waste,  
when the clouds  
drop their store  
of saving rain,  
if I'm not  
within a mile  
of their shoots.

## Mahavira

I've fallen in love  
with every animal  
in the world.

So much so  
I'm unable to do a thing  
around the house.

You ask me to clean  
the windows so they'll  
shine, and I say that  
spotlessness will harm  
the backyard birds,

the thud of *slam*  
and sudden death,  
that I'll be triggered  
by the sight of feathers,  
a blue jay's broken neck  
and fractured skull.

Our vacuum is an enemy  
of *ahimsa*, that Sanskrit  
word of peace for every  
Jain, non-violence  
with every step, that I've studied  
Mahavira—

am convinced  
the spiders in our carpet  
smell of sentience;  
that to suck up their silky  
webs, their eggs and  
future offspring, would be  
nothing short of murder.

*Live and let live,*  
in all those corners  
we never look at  
anyway.

I'd wash the supper  
dishes, dust the counter-  
tops, if it weren't for the  
microbes and the mites,  
that they've existed  
much longer than we have,

that to disregard their feelings  
due to stature  
is clearly sizeist—  
they're in a universe  
all their own  
and we surely wouldn't like it  
if a colossus  
of cosmic proportions  
did the very same to us.

And the reason I refuse  
to cut the lawn? The mower is  
a guillotine on wheels,  
one that would make Napoleon  
cringe,

that the field mouse in the grass  
has done *nothing* to deserve  
this dreadful fate,  
that both of us  
will reap from lofty turf,

you with your toes  
in the soft of green,  
me with my feet  
on the ottoman,  
cheering when the quarterback  
is sacked, by the defensive  
end who's never squashed  
a bug since he was born.

## Victor

Our friend prefers Victor  
to Vic. He has no patience  
for those too lazy  
to include the second syllable.

*What's the big deal?*  
he hears, from Steve  
not Steven, Dave not David,  
Mike not Michael.

His parents  
had stayed up  
throughout the night,  
just days before he was born,  
chose *Victor* over 100,000  
others, that they declined to  
save some dollars  
on the engraving of his bracelet,  
never falling to truncation,

that *Vic*  
was nowhere to be spoken,  
from junior kindergarten  
to MBA,  
birthday gifts unopened  
if a short-form had been  
scrawled,



saying  
it wasn't him,  
that he refused to wear a lanyard  
pre-scribed with Sharpie black,  
by someone who assumed  
it didn't matter,

and he won't check-in  
to the hospital  
on point of death  
if they get it wrong,

swearing  
the carver of his tombstone  
had better *etch*  
in all six characters,

just a single letter shy of  
seventh heaven,  
the luck of the dice,  
a wonder of the world,

that he really doesn't  
need to add a y,  
knowing that to him will go  
the spoils either way.

## Woman, or Incongruity

*one*

Your mother was alluring in the nude.  
I say this because her photo album  
was left upon the table. Did shyness  
overcome her when she  
picked up the pics at the Fotomat?

We are the only creatures, clothed.  
The others haven't a stitch  
and we say we are enlightened?

All of us are naked in the shower.  
I don't mean at once, in the same stall.  
Just the thought will make us wince.

Back to the earlier point  
about the clothing.  
Do the children who sew for a pittance  
make it *sanctified*?  
Was the cotton picked to the lash  
the sign of some godly *purity*?

*two*

*You* are the one whom God  
should have made in the beginning.  
A more admirable name  
for each animal,

winding in a way  
that only a river  
and a *woman* possibly can,  
the curves of breasts  
and hips,

someone the Lord  
would not have said *no* to  
regarding what's in-  
between the leaves—

a fruit  
no tree of knowledge  
can ever take from you  
again.

*three*

I pluck the olives from the salad  
and that makes it less than Greek.  
I retain the blocks of feta  
and consider *German-Jew*.  
It's *been* an oxymoron  
since nineteen-thirty-three.

Bring me beer from Bavaria  
and hot latkes from the slum.  
I'll gladly prove what *cannot*  
go together.

A frown is a smile  
*standing* on its head.

Feet are a pair of hands  
*unwilling* to clasp in prayer.

Toes are cognisant  
that fingers are more lovely—  
so they *never* stretch for the sky.

Unable to grant any light of its *own*,  
the moon is but a mirror for the sun  
in which to worship its own reflection.

What is *ugly*, anyway?  
Is it the absence of beauty  
or too much of it all at once?

## Spoken Word

I definitely feel out of place,  
at this late-night poetry  
slam, over 30 years older  
than this crowd of teens and  
twenties  
who are speaking  
their bitter truth:

the fracture of relation-  
ships, the lines of intersection,  
narratives  
of racist taunts  
and kicks  
to the fucking head  
(from the anti-queer brigade),

and it's not that I can't relate—  
*fag!* tossed my way  
from all the kids  
now grey with age, playing  
sudoku by the fire  
but that's *another* shoddy  
poem I'll likely write—

for within this present moment  
Naomi has hit her stride,  
hooking me along  
with her inflection,

familiar as it is,  
an echo of a hundred thousand  
poets who rarely glance  
upon a page,

or don a pair of glasses  
sliding down  
along their nose, one that's  
burrowed in a book  
these flashy vogues  
have yet to read,

and her eyes are seared in mine,  
perhaps wondering  
why I'm here,  
so straight and pale a visage,  
so Luddite  
without a phone,

that I've likely never heard of  
Twitch and TikTok,  
knowing that I'd be lost—  
especially in the latter,

where every word's a beat,

every syllable  
always locked  
in recollection,

where youth and fleeting beauty  
pirouette,  
in the shadow of a *bomb*  
that's failed to show,  
for generations,

of which poets  
abandoned birds and blooms  
to howl against its menace.



## Pockets

*I've got one hand in my pocket  
and the other one is playin' a piano*

—Alanis Morissette

I can never have enough pockets.  
I've bought a dozen cargo pants  
for the multifarious pockets  
that they boast. No other kinds will do.

I need a pocket for my keys.  
I need a pocket for my wallet.  
I need a pocket for my covid mask  
and ones for the notes I jot—  
with a selection of ballpoint pens.

I realize I've embarrassed you on dates—  
your slacks without a ripple  
while mine are hugely bulged,  
*sagging* from added weight:  
my plums and water bottle, my phone and  
cigarettes, the pair of Ralph Lauren—  
hoping the lenses aren't scratched  
by the deodorant I carry just in case.

I bring a bar of Dove, a folded facecloth with  
me when we're at the shopping mall—  
their bathrooms are notorious

for their running-out-of-soap,  
for their dryers on the fritz,  
that hygiene's more important  
than my wearing some haute couture.

And I've ketchup when we need it—  
the food court cutting costs,  
too cheap to include  
a packet with our fries.

I want *pockets* within my pockets—  
ones that securely snug my  
*Fisherman's Friend*, knowing I can't afford  
to drop them on the floor, how germmy  
that would be, though I have some *sanitizer*  
with me if it happens.

You tell me I should get a better system,  
like you with your nylon purse, that women  
are a walking *pharmacy*,  
have ten times more to carry  
than us males, have foregone the many  
pockets since the Holocene began,  
knowing *one* was a pain in the ass:  
for the desert kangaroo with precious lading,  
the knackered baby within,  
hopping along the outback  
without a means to ease her burden.

## **Aquatics**

*Can you cry  
underwater?*

the click-bait  
write-up  
asks me,

well, poses  
the question  
to *you*,

who've gone  
further down  
than I have,  
in the nearby  
lake and ocean,

swum in the  
deepest end  
of every pool  
since you were 8,

and you concur  
with the premise  
of the essay,  
say your face  
was soaking wet,

and not from  
H<sub>2</sub>O,  
but from the *grief*  
discharged  
from your ducts,

that it was the *only*  
place you could  
find  
to let it go,  
the fish *indifferent*  
to your wailing,  
the tremor of  
your limbs,  
the scream  
they couldn't hear—

or the weeping  
that you did  
after plunging  
off the board,  
knowing few  
could hold their  
breath as long as  
you,  
knew the figures  
that you saw  
were shoulder-down,

no open eyes  
in sight,

that none could  
decipher *tears*  
from all the beads  
that dotted faces,

knowing you're not  
allowed to cry  
in summer sun,  
even if your uncle  
who had touched you  
shouts *Marco! Polo!*

under the guise  
of being playful,  
that he's  
only setting *free*  
his inner child,  
like your father  
always did  
until he couldn't  
touch the bottom  
with his toes.

**“Skinny Minnie Miller”**

We tend to feel bad  
for *the fat kid*,  
the comparison  
to whales and hippos,  
the earthquake jokes  
and *thunder thighs*,

while the skinny  
boy in the desk  
near the window  
has also heard it all:

*the human toothpick*,  
*bag of bones*,  
the *eat a sandwich!*  
said a hundred  
thousand times,

that he can slip into the crack  
between the doors,  
the ones which lead to the gym,

the girls in  
stiches  
whenever it's  
*shirts and skins*,

saying they can't  
tell him apart  
from the *shaft*  
of his hockey stick,

that the kids can wrap  
two fingers around his  
wrist, that he's come to  
dread the summer,  
the taunts at the swimming  
pool,

and if he thought public  
school was cruel,  
grade nine will be a  
hellscape, the acne *rising*  
across his face  
as if pushed *up*  
from tectonic plates,

a range  
of red mountains  
that will disfigure  
a gauntly smile,  
when he'll ask a *dozen*  
girls to dance,

on a throbbing  
Friday night,

their callous *no*  
that come with snickers,  
not the chocolate bar  
to blame  
for his bumpy visage,  
or the one he  
should devour  
to put some flesh  
on his skeletal frame,

but the laughter that's  
heard when you're no longer  
human, when your clothes  
forever sag,  
when you're sarcastically  
asked  
of *Auschwitz*,

that you should get on with it  
already, find a lanky shovel,  
dig your fucking  
grave, climb right into your coffin,  
the one with plenty of  
room to spare.



## Sister Doreen

paced up and down the rows  
between our desks,  
yardstick in her  
grasp, ready to rap  
the knuckles of our hands,  
should we dare to grin or  
sneer, fail to pray *Hail Mary*  
without the reverence  
She was due.

Behind  
the school at recess,  
we surmise  
she's never had sex,  
been a frump since she was  
eight, wouldn't know a  
condom from a balloon.

She greets us back  
with a snarl,  
ever-scanning for  
mockery,

bellowing *wipe that stupid  
smirk  
off your face!*

And that's the moment  
when you did it,  
took a napkin from your  
pocket,  
dragged it *across*  
your curling lips,  
your mouth then a rigid  
line, like the *pews*  
at Sunday Mass,  
or the cross above  
the Confessional,  
in which you'll enter  
the day before,  
offer remorse  
to the forgiving  
Priest,

who'd met the Sister  
years ago, when she was  
a *postulant*,  
one who took a binder  
to her breasts,  
a practice  
she began at  
13 years, after her  
father began to fondle  
her in the dark,

shoved his hand  
between her legs,

in front of Mary  
cloaked in blue  
upon the wall,  
who later offered  
solace, a place  
where she was shielded  
from the touch,  
where the only  
naked man  
she'd ever see

was nailed above her head,  
in wood and then in  
gold around her neck,  
unable to lift a finger  
in the night.

## Longing for Charlton Laird

The best thesaurus  
I've ever had  
(and yes, I'll admit  
that I use one,  
that I can't  
fire off  
five-hundred  
thousand words  
from the front of  
my fucking skull)  
is a *Webster's*  
*New World*  
*Thesaurus*

by Charlton Laird,  
2003 edition,  
one I had to tape  
like a doctor  
closing wounds  
on the battlefield,

and I've been  
hunting  
for an updated  
version ever since  
(though mine *boasts*  
it's "completely new" —

a one-time truth  
now faded lie),

well, sleuthing  
as far as  
bookstores  
will allow,  
and that a google  
search will take me,

only to discover  
Charlton died  
in '84,

making me wonder  
how he'd done it,  
invoking *synonyms*  
while in a coffin  
(or as a forlorn  
heap of ash  
in someone's urn),  
figuring  
what to say  
in place of *life*—  
though life *itself*  
had slipped  
on through his fingers

(well, if he still  
had them that is,  
boney as they'd  
be).

I feel as if  
I should name him  
as co-author,  
of all the poems  
I've ever scribed,  
knowing some  
of the searing verbs  
belong to him,

that I might have  
uttered *heart*  
instead of *pith*,  
if not for his suggestion,

*old* rather than  
*seasoned*,  
which may have  
caused my wife  
a bit of offense,  
the spark to end our  
marriage,

though I might have  
won her back  
with my *enchantment*  
in lieu of *love*,

that my little extra  
effort  
regained her favour,

a sprinkling  
touch of magic  
from the pages  
in my hand,

that I've never  
believed in ghosts  
until today,

his sibilance of  
nouns  
providing rescue,  
from another  
tired lyric,

his antonyms  
a warning  
to watch my step,

that what I'd thought  
was a flawless term  
is in fact  
the *opposite*,

that I'll die from  
embarrassment  
if I use it,

join him in that great  
Athenaeum in the sky,

our conversations  
locked  
in pregnant pauses,

each of us  
trying to conjure  
the perfect word.



## Sébastien

The artist exhibiting his work  
in this dingy, downtown gallery  
paints nothing but bowls of fruit.

Maybe he has some other  
themes in his vapid repertoire  
but all that's here  
from wall to wall  
are bowls of fucking fruit,  
ones so dull and trite  
he should have handed us  
espresso as we browse.

In a whisper,  
I ask you if he's ever read  
the news, notices the homeless  
in their rags a block away,  
a mother selling her body  
near the stoplight, kitty-  
corner to where we're trapped,  
unwilling to cause this dilettante  
offense,

that we're pressed  
by etiquette  
to act like we're  
enthralled,

eyeing every  
stroke, insipid tint  
and tone,

that we'll be obliged  
to tell this boring hack he's great,  
we'd *love* to take his card,  
maybe purchase something later,

but before that dénouement,  
here's a banal bowl of apples  
to make us think  
life's peachy-keen,

*forget* the Black youth  
gunned by cops—  
*here's a pair of*  
*avocados*

and the Residential  
"schools"—  
*bananas have never*  
*looked better*

please don't speak  
of genocide—  
*the plums still have*  
*their pits*

and the earth getting  
hotter by the hour—  
*see the orange*  
*and its arc,*  
*how fresh it looks*  
*in my vessel,*

*its sweetness in my mouth*  
*once I've put my brush away,*  
*kissed the photo of my wife*  
*snapped a day before she died.*

## The Mona Fucking Lisa

After a single session,  
I already regret my *sign-up*  
for this ekphrastic poetry  
course, cursing to you  
the assignment I was given:

*Mona Lisa, the fucking Mona  
Lisa, like that hasn't been done  
a gazillion times*

and yes, I won't be able to fake it,  
that everyone and their mailman  
knows her visage,  
are well-versed in da Vinci's flair,  
and their lofty expectations  
will be something I can't deliver.

You ask me what our poet friend was given,  
the one who always gets the lucky breaks,  
and I tell you the *Voice of Fire*,  
three lines of blue-red-blue,  
vertically trite and prosaic,  
that no one's ever heard of Barnett  
Newman because he sucks,  
that I could have scrawled a sonnet  
on my kindergarten days,  
on a pair of simple colours,

how the Gallery  
had been fleeced in '89,  
caught up in the avant-garde,  
how 1.8 million  
could have gone to help the homeless,  
paid for their chalets  
and pedicures, covered  
the cost and tip  
for their tortellini  
Bolognese;

but as it is,  
I have to *sleuth* my way  
behind that Delphic smile,  
invent a tale of Giocondo,  
that Leonardo  
tried to paint her  
minus mirth and maturation,  
in 1499,  
when his subject began to sob  
from pent-up grief, reliving the death  
of her baby daughter,  
his *Moaning Lisa* a work of art  
the Renaissance ignored  
(bathing in their beam  
of erudition), that even Machiavelli  
said *chin up, she needs a grin*;

that when the *time*  
arrived to try it all again,  
da Vinci made a jest,  
a side-splitter, that Lisa barely  
smirked at his ill-timed droll,  
that he hadn't a clue  
how it felt to love and lose,  
consumed as he was with  
innovation, invention,  
his maps and magnum opus,

failing to heed  
the red of blood and life,  
her blue, blue mood.

## Contractions

I say our spell check's  
rather daft  
to underline in red  
my use of *amn't*.

I am not impressed  
when you tell me  
it isn't valid,  
despite the Irish  
lips that speak it,  
adding it's a stunt,  
to inflame  
the English snobs,  
the ones who lift  
their crumpets in the air,  
sing *Charles is our King!*

*Amn't I your girl?*  
Joyce in *Ulysses*  
came to write,  
and none would dare  
to insert an  
*erratum* slip,  
citing it as *err*.

*You're not in Ireland*  
now, Boland as a  
girl was told  
when she sprung the word  
in class,  
immortal now in verse  
she penned  
without a second thought,

as will I, in a poem  
that even you'll  
refuse to read,  
unless I *write*  
a second draft,  
for a sharp-eyed  
London editor,

who has never set a *foot*  
in Cork or Dublin,  
one who knows a typo  
when they see it.



## Ennui

I'm bored.

This would be  
a terrible time  
to scribe a string  
of words.

It might be better  
if I depicted  
my mood as *ennui*—

then at once  
I'd pique some  
interest, from both the  
writer (that's me) and the  
reader (that's you)

but maybe not, that the  
word's been used  
en masse,  
in a slew of  
poetry chic,

that it's  
trendy to slip it in,  
our scrawls  
without a muse

though we could say  
it's the current *zeit-*  
*geist*, leaving us at the  
periphery

which all sounds  
kinda cool, but still a *bore*  
nevertheless,

that it's the proverbial  
worse-than-death,

whereas the end of life  
births epics, sagas,  
ones to last millennia

while my staring at the wall,  
at paint that's been  
dry for years,

is hardly  
conducive  
to legend,

unless a Frenchman's  
ghost, invoked,

the one who coined  
the term,

on a week  
he sat *alone*,  
watched the sloth-  
like ascent of grass,

before he could  
summon  
the word to describe it.

## Barky McBarkface

is mailing it in today,  
his half-assed *ruff*  
a far cry from his  
usual barrage of  
WO-WO-WO-WO-  
WOOFF!!!

when his teeth  
are keenly bared,  
sharpened by the  
*years* of crunchy bits,  
his tongue a hanging  
sock that's soaked  
in drool,

and we've been  
grateful  
for the window  
that keeps him in,  
on his human's  
upholstered couch,  
intimidating  
*any* who venture near,

who worry he  
might smash right through  
the glass, devour the flesh  
right off their bones,

ones he'd calmy  
chew  
come the slaughter's  
epilogue

but not *today*,  
his head barely  
lifting from his  
post, where his daily  
sentry duties  
have kept the neighbours  
on their toes,  
literally—

a ballerina's step  
to check the mail,  
a soft and trepid  
creeping to the car,  
an *exhalation*  
once they've locked  
themselves inside,  
repeating the  
scenario  
but in reverse,  
when they've returned  
to their driveway  
with a gulp,

but for *us*, on our  
pleasant constitutional,  
the one he *normally*  
interrupts,  
we worry that he's  
sick, that decrepitude  
and wear  
have settled in,

that we *won't*  
know what to do  
come his passing,  
won't know what to  
speak of  
when the birds are  
melancholic,  
when the air  
is dense with sweat, the  
clouds a brim of black  
before they spot us,  
walking 'round the bend,  
a *flash* and peal  
of fury to be unleashed,  
one that scares us  
shitless, warns  
us to keep our distance.

## **"me too"**

When I tell you *I love you*  
you answer "me too"

and perhaps I misconstrue,  
that you love *yourself*  
like the affirmations advise,

the ones we see on Instagram,  
that Rupi Kaur is full of them,  
churning them out like some poet  
in a fast-food window,

where you pick up a side of  
"you're better off without him"  
plus some platitude on the rain  
to wash it down,

or maybe "me too" is a memory,  
in the (not so) recent past:

an abusive ex, a diddling dad,  
the gymnastics coach who always  
held you snug, checked out your  
*ass* instead of your landing,  
after vaulting and parallel bars;

but then I've always read  
too *much* into your words,  
thinking there's some story  
below the surface,

a recollection  
that encircles like a shark,  
that you're afloat  
in a punctured dinghy  
awaiting rescue,

by an aqua knight who rides  
the seven seas, one who sees  
a kraken where there's not,

thinks "right back at you,"  
"ditto kiddo"

is the beast of a thousand  
fathoms he's come hastily  
to slay.



## Magic

The final line of this  
poem no longer  
exists. It was surely there  
for the taking, its fingernails  
clutching rock, at the  
top of a ragged *cliff*  
from which it hung,  
a *Wile E. Coyote*  
in the making.

This poem's final line  
is a bar of *soap*  
in a steamy shower,  
pushed *away* from my  
hand by its slime,  
ready to trip me *up*  
the moment it  
falls, my eyes closed tightly  
from the suds of cheap  
shampoo, its lie of *no more*  
*tears*.

The final line of this  
poem is a cheeky *kid*  
playing hide-and-seek,

concealed behind the  
curtains, waiting for me  
to open—

then disappear  
like David Blaine.

Dear darling of a  
brat, I promise not to  
harm, will only *borrow*  
what I need to make this  
grand, let you vanish  
in the air

once I've wrenched you  
from my hat  
by your fluffy ears.

## After the Eclipse

It's there,  
in our walk around  
the crescent,  
the sign a golden  
diamond:

*Blind  
Child  
Area*

one that's weathered  
from the elements,  
from the creep  
of rust and age.

It's *been* here  
long enough  
for the kid to be grown-  
up,

and now we  
look around us  
left and right,  
spy the houses  
and their trees,

the veranda  
on which he sits,  
in the vivid  
imagination  
of our minds,

tinted Ray-Bans  
on his eyes,  
their black *opacity*,

in his lap  
an open book,  
the white of  
pimplly braille,

perhaps a 19<sup>th</sup>-  
century classic,  
or the latest from  
Stephen King,

subduing his depression,  
his lack of intimate  
sex,

his hearing  
sharp as ever,  
as it was when he was  
six,

right after he  
lost his sight,

when the footsteps  
of the aphids  
piqued his ears,  
the wings of moths  
to follow,  
even spiders  
threading webs,

and now,  
if he could sense us,  
the heaving  
of our breath,  
the thump  
of our assumptions,

bursting  
through our chests  
like the roar of an  
atom bomb,

the flash of which  
would blind us  
unless we looked  
the other way,

as we'll do in just  
a moment,  
when we think we've  
seen him waving  
from a porch,

the one on which  
he rocks,  
wistfully,  
cacophonous  
amid the quiet.

## **Groundhog Day, or *Wiarthon Willie***

I didn't see my shadow  
at the bus stop—  
but no one even  
asked me if I had, if I  
was A-OK  
after slipping on the ice,  
the coffee in my hand  
to rouse the snow.

On this day of psychic rodents,  
what's it like  
to sense an early Spring?  
To feel that others  
give a damn,  
if only once a year,  
40 million moods  
to be contingent  
on your forecast?

Or there's six more weeks  
to sleep  
before you rise,  
missing nothing more than drifts  
and biting wind,  
that our grudge  
will be forgotten  
as you dream?

That in your den  
of slumber, you speak  
to Sun and Earth?  
The only ones that love  
without condition,  
to wake you  
very gently, forever  
expecting nothing  
in return.



## Memes, or Now It's Called Eswatini

There's supposedly  
a desk  
at the airport  
in Vienna,  
for travellers  
arriving there  
in err,

mistaking Austria for  
*Australia*,  
dressed for the  
desert outback,

wondering if they've  
counterparts  
who've made  
a similar blunder,  
traipsing about  
in Sydney, garbed in  
Lederhosen,  
yodelling to the koalas  
and the bobbing kangaroos.

Then there's the skier  
and St. Bernard  
who booked a *flight*  
to Swaziland—

toasting Africans  
with their brandy  
on the runway,  
where they heard  
it hadn't snowed  
in sixty years.

But I was the *fool*  
of them all,  
signing up to learn  
some Javanese,

hoping to land  
my dream job  
in the halls of *Toho Co*,  
animate *Godzilla*  
for the screen,

or write a poem  
of Nagasaki  
for my students,

be a turnabout  
*Tokyo Rose*,  
tell them all on TikTok  
it's *America* who's  
victorious at the end,

my ignorance a bliss,  
taking the *bewilderment*  
on their faces  
to be a look of  
wondrous awe,

each bow  
a reverent blessing  
from the land of  
the rising sun,

a meagre fifty-  
thousand k's  
from an island  
near Borneo,

where, I'll be told,  
they're still expecting  
my arrival, a limo  
ready to take me  
to wherever I'd like to go.

## **The Postulant**

You asked me if I'd still love you  
if you became a nun,  
an odd thing to inquire I thought  
as I've never heard you consider  
religious vows  
or donning a veil or habit—

in fact I've yet to see you pray  
although I really think you do,  
before you're asleep in the guest room  
after a glass of wine too many  
(like tonight),  
mumbling something about its redness,  
its salvation from our iniquities  
but then it wouldn't just be wine  
but the result of a priestly  
sign-of-the-cross;

and I can't hear anything more  
through this heavy, wooden door  
I once carried up the stairs,  
sweating, knees buckling,  
falling more than once.

**Chuck Barris**

That guy from *The Gong Show*  
Is dead.

I only think of it  
because there's a portable  
gong in this antique store,  
way out in the country  
where we say we're never judged.

The only reason  
for a gong like this  
was to summon someone for supper:  
an irritable granddad, conceivably,  
much too hard-of-hearing  
to heed a vocal call  
to consume.

I don't know how a *gong*  
came to symbolize  
artistic failure—  
a juggler dropping eggs,  
their shells now sticky shards;  
a ventriloquist  
flapping his lips  
like wind-blown ensigns  
on a ship;

a gorilla-suited singer  
cracking notes  
in drunk falsetto—

the padded mallet swinging  
really an act of *euthanasia*,

sparing  
would-be performers  
further jeers and rotting fruit,

its reverberations longer  
than a verbal shout to stop—  
but not so cruel and caustic.

And then there's  
Gene Gene the Dancing Machine—  
never allowed to finish  
his minimalist moves,  
cut off by a *commercial*  
before his inner Fred Astaire  
could be unleashed,

score three *10s*  
from adjudicators  
who were always on time  
for their dinner.

## APE

I always  
pull my punches  
playing Scrabble—

just this after-  
noon, for instance,  
with a potential  
triple-word,  
my holding back an

R  
that spelled out  
RAPE,  
like what you went  
through years ago,

my laying down  
instead  
a tail-less primate,  
beating his savage  
chest, seizing by force  
the female  
of his choosing,

then again, *no*—

to *imitate*,  
to *mimic* the tenant  
below us  
doing laundry,  
her bulging, puffy  
cheeks  
much like a  
chipmunk's;

the one who's  
scrubbing the crimson  
from her nightgown,  
while we're busy  
with our chuckles,

who scrubs and scrubs  
and scrubs  
when no one's looking.



## Sui Generis

*It's never the same sky*  
*twice*, I remark,  
on this walk that hugs  
the river

and you're right to cite  
the saying as a riff  
from our former  
Sensei, who spoke of ripples  
in the water and the  
debris that's carried  
away,

and I'm sure he thought  
the *same*  
when it comes to clouds,  
each wisp and configuration:

like there, the horns of a bull,  
one that mimics Taurus  
in the night, when again  
the combinations—

*endless*, like a lotto  
with only a fixed amount  
of balls,

their digits dropped  
by the *push*  
of gust and gale,

their numeric, Arabic faces  
granting wishes,  
like a genie  
freed in the desert—  
from a bottle swept  
by something we cannot see,

where there's *never*  
a nimbus in sight, a stream  
that surges through, and the stars  
a phantom tease,

that under their fleeting cool  
we swear the patterns are alive,  
inspire us to entreat  
upon the first we see  
each dusk,  
as if the billion proffered up  
by all the children of the Earth

*never* go unanswered,

as if the mothers and  
their dead arose  
when early morning sun  
was at its lowest,

like a Christ who strolls  
the streets of Jerusalem,  
His blood on cobble-  
stones

barely even dried,

mistaken for a Ghost  
who answers prayer  
to this very day,

with the holes that  
grace His palms,  
the rivers  
gushing through,

astonished He holds  
the whole world in His hands.

## Bistro de Montréal

You're hesitant  
to check  
the bill of fare, *note de frais*  
it says  
in padded vinyl, recalling  
as a girl  
you'd ordered *consommé*,  
after your parents  
let you pick  
from the menu *en Française*,  
anything  
that you wanted,  
thinking it sounded cool,  
never catching the  
smirk  
from the maître d',

that you were left  
to learn your lesson,  
slurping broth  
and fallen tears,  
eyeing your siblings  
wolf *le hamburger*  
*et les frites*, with a slice of  
*à la mode*,  
your parents, their  
*crème brûlée*,

while you chose  
to play it safe  
and ordered nothing  
for *le dessert*,  
your mother's *rien*,  
*s'il vous plait*,  
delivered with an air  
of punishment,  
for your pouting  
and jealous gaze,  
for your failure  
with a language  
they had loved,

and you plotted  
a future meal  
when you were older,

worked your way to  
C in fifth-grade French,

when you gleaned  
a dozen mollusks  
from the garden,  
placed them  
on your parents'  
gilded plates,

that *escargots*  
would surely  
pay them back,

that *vengeance*  
is the same in either  
tongue,  
served best  
when *il fait froid*,

will take  
its sweetest time  
to come to pass,  
like a snail that needs  
forever  
to move a mile,  
careful not to crack  
its spiral shell,  
like a chicken  
and its egg,  
*un oeuf*  
*et un poulet.*

## Untitled

I asked if you'd  
come up with a  
name for the poem  
you've been writing  
and you answered *not yet*,

annoyed by my  
response: *great title*,  
*succinct and*  
*to-the-point*,  
which was super-  
fluous, I know,  
as well as most  
unfunny,

which reminded  
me of the moment  
REM were *Out of Time*,  
to conjure the *name*  
of their new LP,  
that Warner  
unwittingly *broke*  
the creative block,

that I too  
have seen the crag  
of muted stones,

the words that failed to  
topple  
off my tongue's  
precipice,

like the night  
I was unable to  
speak, *anything*  
of love, if I loved  
you, if it thrust into  
my side like a lance,  
staked my wooden  
heart inside a  
coffin,

that in the agony  
that is silence,  
all I could finally  
manage: *not now,*  
*I'm sorry, not yet.*



## The Tortoise

takes it personally  
when called a *Turtle*—  
scantly referred to  
in poetic lore;  
remembered  
as a laggard,

for its excessive  
*longevity*—  
over one-and-a-half times  
a centenarian,

seeing kings and  
kingdoms fall,  
new countries  
arise  
from the smoky  
dissipation  
of war. Surviving both Castro  
and the Queen  
and a dozen-plus  
Presidents  
in-between.

You've endured,  
dear tortoise,

all of your animal friends  
(if indeed you had any)—  
and at funerals:  
always the deathmaid,  
never the death.

You were there,  
creeping over a log  
when the Wrights learned  
how to fly, then  
awkwardly stretching  
your wrinkled neck  
to see the moon  
in '69;

and still, as the unburied  
decay and scatter,  
you linger, freeze-  
framed around the world  
by an iPhone's mocking  
meme;

and you recall  
when it was *new*,  
these devices for  
distant speaking,

hand-cranked,  
then dialed numerically.

Only the trees  
can tell your tale,  
that you once  
were young and spry,

plodding a *quarter-*  
foot a minute  
while the wild west  
was won,

spending evanescent  
moments  
*within* your crusty shell,

that you were  
far more sociable  
than we think,  
a jokester by the pond,

and yes, *you* were the one  
that bested

the rabbit's  
cocksure cousin,

one with a similar  
problem  
and a homophone  
of hair,

*getting*  
little respect,  
*shamed* by losing a  
race so long ago—

that to you was merely  
yesterday, your single  
instance of glory,  
the only act to *outlive*  
your endless aging.

## Success

The truncation of  
words is nothing  
new. I've heard  
we're too lazy, as speakers  
of English, to go with  
the weighty version  
of common terms.

*Congratulations!*  
was the norm  
when acknowledging  
someone's success,  
till 5 syllables were  
simply too clunky,  
only 50% of the letters  
now in vogue.

*Congrats!* was sent  
to me, from another struggling  
wordsmith, for some smudgy,  
crummy chapbook, spat  
out from my printer,  
the *brother* I call the  
*bro*,

its twenty pages  
poorly bound  
by my *Stanley*  
*Bostitch* stapler,  
nicknamed *Stan*  
*the Man*.

Of course, in another time,  
I'd have cracked the  
*Dom Perignon*,  
celebrated 90  
collected poems  
and offset printing  
on the spine.

As it is,  
there's nothing  
to *revel* about,  
everyone & their  
goldfish  
are doing  
the very same thing,

whipping out the  
verse  
as if a drag  
on a *cigarette*—

a *ciggy*,  
my friend from  
England  
would say,

until it's shortened  
to a *cig*—

by some torpid  
excuse for a  
parrot,

the one my nosy,  
next-door neighbour trained  
with cookies, not  
saltines,

its daily *grats!*  
that make me feel  
I've yet to accomplish  
a thing.

## Franklin, 2.0

It's only the beholder's  
eye, you've said,  
that makes you  
do the things you do—

giving an appellation  
to every roach  
that's crossed your path,  
believing they'll  
inherit the Earth;

every cavity in the corner  
with a piece of camembert—  
not a single trap in sight.  
A mouse deserves much better  
than processed cheese.

We thought you mad  
when you spurned each  
*opportunity*—

to *rid* the rooms of  
spiders, the eggs of  
*brown recluse*,

that venom's miscon-  
strued, like the snake's  
out in the desert of  
New Mexico,



where you hugged  
every cactus like a  
cat.

The spawn of every  
fly you'd dubbed *Mag-*  
*nificent*, said the rat  
was just a chipmunk  
in our scraps—  
that fleas were entertainers,  
jumping like acro-  
bats. And the creatures  
of the night? Their bite  
just means *I love you*,  
which you uttered  
in the halls of junior  
high, to the girl  
who called you *gross*,  
*disgusting*, a *zit face*  
*to the max*,

that day you  
came out of the rain,  
head and shoulders  
slumped like letter *f*,  
hands and mouth of  
mud from kissing worms.

## Achilles

The name our  
friend has chosen  
for her mastiff  
is sublime.

We wait to hear  
the inevitable:  
*Achilles, heel!*

Almost *invulnerable*,  
were it not  
for a patch near his  
paw;

able to sniff  
out a cad,  
*any* boorish  
lout  
who makes a pass.

We envision  
a vivid  
scenario,

picture him  
by her side,

at the *Apollo's*  
*Pharmacy*,  
a box of Trojan  
love balloons  
snuck discreetly  
in her purse,  
the one she got  
on Etsy,  
made with  
*vintage*  
'80s horse hair,  
as if some  
stealthy *turnabout*,

hoping a heroic,  
Grecian Spartan  
will ascend  
from *The Illiad*,

the copy she keeps  
by the fire,  
beside a dog-  
eared *Ancient Myths*,

with two  
glasses of  
*Muscat Blanc*,

one for *her*,

and one for a  
woman's best friend,  
beside her with  
his vicious mouth  
agape, a cave of tongue  
and teeth,

ready to *bite*  
on his arrival,  
sit back *down*  
if she commands;

lick the spot  
below his calf  
as if to pity his  
single weakness.

## Rumours

These juicy *pineapple*  
*tidbits*  
are up to speed  
with the latest gossip

or so I quip,  
as we divvy  
them up  
in bowls,  
one for you

and one for my  
idiot self—  
remarking  
I've heard the  
*pears* are splitting up,  
that one was caught  
in a morning  
tryst with a fig;

while cerise  
did *ooh-la-la*  
with some Auckland  
kiwi rogue.

And the coconut  
from Manila?

It ran *off*  
with the melon's  
daughter, mixing  
its *milk*

with the seeds  
we always  
spit *out*,  
like the *crétin*  
from the streets  
of Bordeaux,  
who taught the  
*bona fide* way  
to *cracher*,

and that *pineapple*  
in French  
is *ananas*,  
confused  
with a tropical  
lech,

the one that's  
sheathed  
in yellow, boasting  
of the length of  
his sweet everything.

## The Blues

*Got to pay your dues  
if you wanna sing the blues*

—Ringo Starr

I'm melancholy enough to sing the blues.  
There's surely no shortage of sadness  
to birth despondent, lyrical quatrains;  
my voice just a coke & crackers away  
from that gravelly, soulful sound  
that makes an authentic virtuoso.

But then there's my name—  
with no notable ailment or physical loss  
to grant entry to that Hall of Misery:

*Blind Lemon Jefferson, Peg Leg Howell,  
Cripple Clarence Lofton, Blind Willie Johnson,  
James 'Stump' Johnson, Leukemia Louis Brown*

Let's be perfectly honest:

*Stubbed-Toe Charlie* doesn't cut it,  
and *Runny Nose Ron* isn't worthy  
to strum of endless pain and woe,  
to garner empathy from the folks  
who'd pick *Chess Records* from the stacks,

their singer in midnight shades,  
who knows of poverty, oppression, infirmity;  
that I in my tripping-over-the-cat  
can *never* comprehend.



**Dinosaurs**  
**or If It Wasn't for Adolf Hitler**

I owe my grand  
existence  
to a jagged  
asteroid—

to a circle  
that surrounds  
the *Yucatan*,  
the crater of  
Chicxulub;

to all the fossils  
who didn't adapt,  
had failed  
to be the fittest  
when it mattered.

I would surely  
not be alive  
if not for Hitler,  
my father staying  
put in a German town,  
my mother in a village  
of Ukraine,  
never crossing paths  
in an *English* class,

in a London  
of another sort.

I have always  
hated Hitler  
for *Holocaust*,  
Dresden but a cinder  
because of *him*  
and his paintings *spurned*,  
Europe a steaming  
rubble felling millions.

My Italian friends  
don't realize  
if it wasn't for  
Mussolini, they'd have never  
cried at birth.

Look at Hiroshima  
standing tall—unscorched by  
Enola Gay,  
half a billion  
people that come and  
go, the interchange of  
faces, the names that  
disappear with sleight  
of hand,

replaced by happy  
children  
we'll never know.

We are  
ultimately born  
of *tragedy*:

the driver just  
ahead  
taking the impact  
nearly *mine*,  
surviving by the  
luck  
of a random turn.

You say your  
*baby* owes her breath  
to a brutal rape,  
your dog no  
longer there  
because the first  
to tame a wolf  
had lost a hand  
to a famished bear—  
forty thousand years  
before the Christ.

This isn't just an  
anthem of the past—  
watch the *roll*  
of future dice, their  
crash against the wall:

the ocean-  
dweller *creeping*  
from the shore,  
the silence of the land,  
absent of beast  
and man,  
eyeing remnants  
of a city  
long extinct,  
grateful that we've  
*finally* disappeared,  
its initial step  
like a human's  
on the moon,

still rising  
on the drapes  
of burning sky,  
a ball of  
nonchalance,  
its face of bleached  
indifference.

**faggot**

It took many drinks  
and decades,  
it did, for you to offer  
amends, apology,  
and still with your twinge  
of prevarication  
and over-the-top erudition:

*We revelled in the archaic,  
the antiquated,  
anachronistically worded,  
not quite antediluvian  
but certainly obsolescent,*

*yes, a bundle of sticks,  
tied out of drudgery,  
that you were simply boring,  
that's what we called you,  
dull as dish soap,  
nothing more nothing less.*

## Silenzio

The g in Paglioni  
is apparently  
silent,

with the i  
the sound of e  
(robbing it of  
a kingly lion's  
mane),

while the e itself  
is long and clearly  
Italian,

though *we'd* have  
guessed it simply  
by the décor,

the bottles of Abruzzo  
on the wall,  
the scent of fettuccini  
in the air—

but this *isn't*  
consequential,  
it's not a *Yelp*  
review,

it's all about  
the g  
and its refusal  
to hold its weight,

its obsession  
with its stealth,  
its channelling  
Marcel Marceau,

or like the cat  
of Cary Grant,  
scaling the many *roofs*  
*To Catch a Thief*,

that it should be  
*rooves* instead of  
roofs, like hooves  
and a single hoof,

that the horse  
has got it right  
despite its *neigh*,

the shyness  
that comes and  
goes,

inside our alphabet's  
seventh letter,  
hooking us *along*  
either way—

soundless as a feather,  
roaring  
like a Roman  
god.



## Upon Hearing My Haiku Is Pointless

What's the point of

*Layers of grey cloud  
are leaving the landscape wet  
Ducklings in the grass*

a literary critic asked me,  
saying who cares about ducks  
in the grass and why would anyone  
read a poem about them  
and I emphasized *ducklings*  
which are the babies  
and people are always drawn to babies  
because they're cute and in this case  
they're fuzzy and walk in a row  
after their mother  
and the mother isn't mentioned in the haiku  
if you'll notice  
and the point might be that they're lost,  
maybe orphaned,  
that the grey cloud leaving the landscape  
was far more vicious than we realize,  
casting mother duck *away* in a storm  
and her babies doing an awkward waddle  
in search of her and please tell me *then*  
you don't give a shit.

## Penny & The Englishman

Look right up the sidewalk  
and you'll see her—with her tired,  
spectacled eyes  
and split-end hair of greying brown.

I tell you that she's *still*  
as pretty as sin, stands in line  
at all the busy transit  
stops, hoping one's his get-off point  
but it never seems to be.

She's bled her life away  
I whisper,  
as if some kind of game,  
a starling's secret,  
misadventure  
played to the nines  
and tarnished dreams made  
bright—by a single jiffy wipe.

One fine day  
she'll spot him in a flash,  
pick him out  
from the morning throng,  
and then we'll pause  
for overtime, to see if the wait  
was worthy  
and if skin that's pruned tastes rich.

## Mantis

It's been *years*  
since we've seen one,  
and the wait  
was all for naught—

its head raised  
*haughtily*,  
raptorial *arms*  
held far apart,

not together  
in supplication,  
not in grovel  
to a God,  
an Abrahamic  
Deity  
who supposedly  
made its blueprint,

in the burst  
of a quantum blink,  
along with all the *locusts*  
and big-eyed bugs,

ones who later *devoured*  
Pharoah's fields,

doing whatever  
Yahweh asked,

but let's *dispense* with  
all the hoppers  
in the grass,  
get back to this  
apostate  
who *isn't* on its knees,

you say it's an  
*Atheist*, the mantis  
who balks  
at prayer,  
who watched its *offspring*  
eaten alive,

while humbly  
bowed in *reverence*  
to its Maker,

pled for mercy  
for its young,  
to make the hunter  
much less hungry,  
find a way to *slice*  
its viscous web,

reminded of the  
time  
its mate was *snatched*  
by a thrush's beak,  
a bird's *Kaddish*  
from the highest branch

*ignored*  
by the lobes of the Lord,  
the morning  
in which its hatchlings  
had all *fallen* to the ground,

consumed by an *infidel*,

a hyena perhaps, one who  
merely chuckles  
at the thought, that

the *couturier*  
of fang and claw  
will *yield*  
and intervene,

make the *trophic*  
ledger even,

*admit*

to a blatant flaw  
in His design,

that Eden  
never happened,  
that Darwin  
had it right,  
that life is just  
a bitter work-in-  
progress,

and when asked  
by His disciples  
why things *are*  
the way they are,

He'll simply shrug,  
say none of us  
understand,  
that perfection  
can't be rushed,

will be non-  
negotiable,  
in that distant,  
utopian moment

when a spider  
sucks on nectar  
instead of blood,

when all of us on the *Earth*  
will give His tired ears a break,  
allow Him to hear  
the dawning lilt  
of starlings much in love.

**Monday, 7am**

You greet me with  
*Morning*, never  
*Good Morning*—  
like you did when  
hearts were younger.

*Morning*  
rises from a  
horizon, like an inmate  
from a metal bed,  
nothing to cushion  
his nightmares—  
sentenced to relive a *life*  
that isn't a life—  
the cursing, the welts,  
the bruises;  
the slop passed off  
as food;

the absence of  
*privacy*,  
when one needs it the  
very most,  
gone with the  
gurgle of a flush.



*Good Morning*

is harkened by  
glows, the lilt  
from a lark  
at dawn,  
the gradual  
lift of the light,  
each moment  
far brighter  
than the last.

*Morning* is stating

the obvious, the drudge of a  
turtle-drive,  
the blaring of  
horns at red,

a finger in the  
air  
from the car  
that passes  
on the right.

It's the demand  
from your boss  
to get cracking,

the indigestion  
from the eggs, expired,  
the coffee from *McDonald's*  
too acidic,  
the leaving of  
your kitchen  
without a kiss.

*Good Morning*  
is the merge  
of fervent lips,  
the ecstasy  
of a lingering  
hug, a taste  
from the dreams  
before,

the confession  
of a love  
that never wearies,  
never reaches  
for a cup

until the curtains  
have been opened  
and you stand  
in gaping awe  
at what's to come.

## Sailing

The love poem that I've scribed for you  
is inside an empty bottle,  
Peller Estates, 2024,  
wine from an evening  
that you say we touched and danced  
but I know we never did;

our backs against the wall  
and our feet locked side-by-side,  
tapping on the floor  
to the piano's  $\frac{3}{4}$  time,  
quick enough  
so we could have danced apart,

lagging just a bit  
so we clearly could have clasped,  
shuffled with my arms about your waist  
and yours around my neck.

I imagine you  
picturing movement,  
to music only ears and toes  
partook of,

our bodies *parting*  
as if water  
had wedged itself between,

the gap *widening*  
into a gorge,  
a River *Atlantic* of sorts,  
two continents adrift  
like loosened *jigsaw* pieces,

an ocean born, expanding,  
making *room* for unread verse—  
afloat, undisturbed,  
forever encased in glass.

## On the bliss of our collective ignorance

Let the *Fur*,  
*Zaghawa*,  
*Massaleit*,  
mean nothing at all to us.

Let *Darfur* remain a reference,  
vague, to be sometimes heard  
as filler, when what's cooling  
on the back-end  
burner is calmly  
condescended to,  
allowed a scant  
half-minute of mention.

Let a late-night  
documentary  
on the pulse of genocide  
give its nod to west Sudan,  
to the region  
that was touched upon  
earlier in this poem.

Now flip the jarring channel  
just as quickly as you can,  
as if a commercial's  
annoyance,  
an interruption,

a splash  
in the sleeping face  
of our complacent, crass TV.

Let the villages be burned  
and watch their women, raped by gangs;  
let the *Janjaweed*  
wield machetes  
and the children lose their limbs—  
we only save for oil.

Let the camps swell up  
like a wave, crash  
from overcrowding,  
stomachs cave and bulge  
and the sickness be unnamed:

it's hard  
to remember  
each one,  
easier, by far, to say

*we did not know about it,*  
*we did not know about it,*  
*davon haben wir nichts gewußt.*

## Blank Notebooks

When you're a writer, people tend to give you blank notebooks as gifts. Sometimes, you see one with an enticing cover, one with a picture of a painting by Matisse, for instance, or a Viennese café with old world artists discussing philosophy and love over cups of cappuccino with strips of cherry strudel by their side, and you buy these hardcover books of empty, lined pages and then realize, after the euphoric moment of purchase has passed, that you've sentenced yourself to filling it with poetry or prose whether you want to or not.

There's nothing more demoralizing than having an entire row of virgin journals on the shelf, accentuating your failure to do what you'd promised yourself and others in your usual boastful manner. Sometimes, to lessen the sting of their spotting, you scatter them about your abode—one in the dresser, for example, and another under the bathroom sink, where it may garner dampness and mould, making it unworthy to write in.

And that's when your conniving hits its stride,  
the excuse you've been looking for  
to avoid telling your immediate circle  
of individuals that you've had writer's block  
or have spent too much time on the sofa  
watching reality television or were just too lazy  
to get the job started never mind done;

that all the caffeine in the universe  
couldn't stain the pages with ink;  
that you were secretly hoping that termites  
would infest your place and that they were  
hungry for paper and bookbinder's glue  
and you could show everyone  
the tattered red ribbon they left behind,  
that it was placed near the end  
of your magnum opus,  
the great dystopian novel where the world  
runs out of trees because madness gripped  
the poet and he was unable to stop  
his scribbling even when pens were smashed  
to bits by the masses and he grew sickly  
and pale from frantically jotting things down  
with the blood he once claimed as his own.



### **The Baby, Albeit...**

Maybe I mirror  
you, in ways of  
unawares, as your  
mobile *carousels*  
above your head,

a monitor  
that ensures  
you're sleeping soundly,  
a roll from shielded  
eyeballs

hinting of a dream,

though you're more  
than just phantasmic,  
some fluid, chimeric  
guest, absent of  
speech and belief,

these faintest of  
gurgles unfurling,  
from a body  
that knows not  
its name,

under lull  
of clement light,  
cerulean ceiling—

this elusive, crooked sky.

## The Cameo

The years of the hunt  
have blurred on past  
like a passenger train at guard rails,  
where faces are impossible to recognize  
but waved to nonetheless,  
so as to greet  
in the comfort  
of anonymity.

Then there are the treks to the jewellers,  
the flea market artisans  
and the antique markets  
where none was to be found  
but *good luck in the search*  
consistently heard.

Yet now there's *one* at last,  
made by a craftsman who's clearly gay,  
who I could kiss in a flash of gratitude:

a pallid silhouette,  
embossed as for the blind,  
amid the smooth of charcoal grey,  
Victorian she'd surely be,  
over a century in the making  
(and the finding),

its stark revelation  
at the epilogue,

the strings on standby  
to mark the credits'  
ascending scroll, its appearance  
ever-memorable—  
in the less-is-more shock  
of such brevity.

### **Waiting at the honky-tonk, 4 drinks later**

When my friend, fresh  
from her Dylan Thomas  
dissertation,  
finally shows up  
with a Seagram's face,  
I grow wary  
of her innuendo,  
her philosophical drool,  
delivered one slurred poem  
at a time—

and the brevity of seconds  
pass, my drunken incarnation  
punches back,  
and if I can match her shot-  
for-shot, I'll spout the same  
solipsist creed  
without the call for cabs  
and bouncers,

inebriated enough  
to attain Bukowskian *wows*,

undecided on which desire  
to lay hold of:

to silence her with the shriek  
of a cowboy's drawl,  
or to lay at her feet, extradited  
from inhibition,  
my applause taking  
the form of a kiss  
she has but seconds  
to accept.

### **Beach Baby, 40 Years Later**

All the sunbathers  
save one are rather young—  
*Coppertone, Hawaiian Tropic*  
bouncing beams from taut bellies  
and shapely thighs—  
attracting gawkers mostly male  
as well as a pair  
of female marchers  
I'd seen at the recent  
Pride Parade.

Then there's the woman in black—  
not a spectre from a graveyard  
or a burka-clad visitor  
from afar  
but a past-her-prime and plumpish  
matriarch,  
garnering no first  
and second glances  
from the ones who look for flesh  
under the *guise*  
of seeking stones to skip  
across the sheen of lake.

Her bikini in the sand  
reveals the creases  
and the rolls of  
excess food, childbirth—

a difficult delivery  
to a stillborn  
*terminus*,

a husband who fled  
for a teenaged touch,

and the body  
bearing those wounds  
now the periodic brunt  
of sneers from those  
who dare to peek,  
feigning that they're squinting  
from the light.



## TL;DR, or Too Long; Didn't Read

I've always found it hard  
to keep abreast  
of every acronym, ones  
running rampant  
on my social media feeds,  
and in texts that come  
from the poets  
on their phones.

It started with  
Laugh Out Loud,  
an LOL  
that was really rather  
easy, even for a dimwit  
such as me;

the surprise of  
OMG and WTF,

but when I first saw  
FTW, I was thinking  
Fuck The What,  
which made no sense  
at all—*before* you  
came and told me  
*For The Win*  
goes rather nicely,

with the Greatest Of  
All Time,

the GOAT  
for which  
only sports fans  
give a shit.

It was easy as a kid  
to *pretend* we're FBI,

or knocking on a door,  
claiming  
we're the CIA,  
donning raincoats  
and fedoras in the sun;

and all of us knew  
what NASA was,  
while astronauts  
were bouncing  
on the moon;

keeping pace  
in later years  
with every ASAP, SVP—

adhering to my  
desktop  
via yellow  
sticky notes,

the BRB of *chats*  
and communiqués,

the airplane to  
be landing at  
journey's end,  
an accurate ETA,

but as far as  
NRN and TMI,  
I really must confess  
that IDK,

and TBH, I realize  
that I'm AKA "The Dolt,"

which makes me SMH,  
feeling well  
beyond my years,

that I should seek  
the FAQ  
while no one's watching;

and BTW,  
in the future, let's  
Just *Write* The Fucking Words—

or, if you prefer,  
JWTFW,  
you lazy SOBs.

## Gumby Plays Twister and It Isn't Fair

*How low can you go?*

And there he is,  
doing the limbo,  
showing off at parties  
as you might expect.  
Of course he wins again,  
the fucker,  
and why do I hate him so?

You say he's not so bad,  
that he's grieving the loss of  
Pokey—who left him for  
greener pastures  
(though this cretin  
is green enough),

that I'm simply jealous  
that he's everything  
I'm not—and *touché*,  
you've scored a point. I'm forever  
in the shadow of his clay.

*Let's play Twister!*

he caterwauls on  
cue, doing a ninety-  
degree backwards  
arch,

pretzeled arms  
and legs, adored by the  
guests, loved so much  
by they and you  
my heart and bones

crack

from simply watching.

## Humidex 54

We hear it's getting  
hotter, our eyes that look  
to the atmosphere alight;

our star's becoming brighter  
we surmise, though it isn't even  
half-an-inch  
closer than before. We can't see  
the carbon filling  
skies like lungs with smoke.

There was a time  
the fires were small:

to cook a trout,  
to keep from  
being *cold*  
in the coal of  
night. Now, B.C.  
is ablaze, and another  
starlet's mansion  
is consumed.

It could be worse, you say—  
we could be pilgrims  
doing circles  
down in Mecca,

robed from head to foot,  
or roofers hauling shingles  
in our sweat,  
the streams of which  
taste bitter  
like Deadeast Sea,

when blinding sun  
and sorrow are the same,  
*brothers of another  
mother,*

when all beneath the surface  
comes to burn—water then coral  
then fish—

when all around us  
swirls like a malted  
shake, loosened  
in the melt,

frothing like a madman  
in the clouds, a wave that's  
run amok  
and drowning millions.



## Not Another Fucking Poem About A Tree

There are too many poems about trees.  
How *leaves* bud in April, bloom in May.  
How *birds* bound on branches, lilt  
each lifting of the sun.

There are too many poems about leaves.  
How gracefully they fall, and the  
vibrancy of autumn red  
that bursts like an agèd sun—  
the climax of pleasant weather; a warning  
of the icy, barren limbs that are soon  
to come.

Spare me another poem about the trees.  
I'm tired of their trunks  
and fed up with their foliage.

Write of maggots  
instead—*yes of maggots*.  
How they feast on rotting flesh  
and vile waste.  
Then we ourselves  
will be beautiful.

## Embryonics

Potential  
is overrated.

It's the flip-  
side of what is  
*possible*,  
the call of  
tails and heads;

looking so  
*pendulous*—  
leaving you  
embittered  
by its dangle.

It's the fetus  
in the womb that  
might have made it—  
lost in a *tumble*  
down the stairs.

It births your  
feeling *guilty*,  
for failing  
to make the grade,

for bringing forth  
your parents'  
disappointment,  
forever *shrouded*  
in the umbra  
of another.

It's the tease of  
what-can-*be*—  
if the ducks  
are all aligned,  
at a carnie's  
game of chance;

the fifty-fifty  
pluck  
of *she loves me,*  
*loves me not;*

the toss of  
luck and sevens,  
the *dots* of their  
constellations,

overlooking pines  
that scale the sky,

as if they long  
to kiss the stars;

or the poem which  
craves to lift itself  
to reach  
the crescent moon,

rest its weary  
hat upon its hook.

## Doomsday

I've never believed the apocalypse  
will come,  
that the Mayans ever said  
it would,

espousing instead  
that the alignment of the  
planets  
is simple cosmology—  
no pull on our tides or our fate.

It's not to say  
there isn't a final trumpet,  
the inflation of our star  
like the swell of a balloon  
(and a most beautiful burst  
and nova);

it's not to say our DNA  
won't ripple through the universe  
like the calm of a petering  
wave,

or I won't meet my own  
unfortunate close someday,  
after I've scribbled a poem  
about the ocean's demise

or the death of my high school  
love,

that I could be struck by a driver  
not paying attention,  
thinking of the  
diagnosis  
he was given earlier,  
envious  
of my quick-to-happen  
departure,

the crawl of cancer  
consuming his fear  
that the world will someday  
end.

## Not Even If I Was the Last Poet on Earth

This is a pretty  
crummy way to say *finis*,

when every lark  
and every oak  
have passed away,  
with the *rest*  
of our tired clichés:

The ocean  
and its ships.  
The mountains  
and their snow.  
The poems  
becoming worse  
than even *this*—

when the final  
bard on earth  
hasn't a rhyme  
to go with the times—

waits only for the *red*  
and swell of Sol,  
a sonnet on the sun  
that swallows *every-*  
*thing* in sight:

my pen,  
this book,  
the love I vowed  
would *be* forevermore,

blinded by the *flash*  
and burn of light, in the blink  
before the dark  
in which they're one,

when promises are  
pitched into the void,  
that we've named it  
*Space*  
for a reason,

and did you *honestly*  
expect a happy ending?  
What if I shared my joke  
about the chimp  
and flugelhorn?

What if it *actually*  
made you laugh?  
What then?





The author of over 30 books of poetry, as well as one of short fiction and another of art & photography, Andreas Gripp lives in London, Ontario, with his wife, Carrie.

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I love your craftsmanship, your sense of rhythm, and deployment of consonance and assonance and internal rhyme. It's poetry after my own heart, poetry that dares unabashedly to be beautiful when discussing hard things. Poetry that knows that rolling your car and landing upside-down in a ditch gives you a new perspective on the ground above and the sky below.

Richard-Yves Sitoski, Owen Sound Poet Laureate

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